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DURANGO DAVE, The Young Champion Wrestler; Or, The Colorado Song Queen.

BY MAJOR E. L. ST. VRAIN,

AUTHOR OF "SANCHO PEDRO, THE BOY BANDIT," "REDTOP RUBE," "LEADVILLE NICK," ETC., ETC.



DOUBLY ASSAILED, DURANGO DAVE WAS IN THE GREATEST PERIL OF HIS LIFE. AND EDNA UTTERED A CRY AS SHE SAW THE ITALIAN RAISE HIS KNIFE TO DEAL A FATAL BLOW.

Durango Dave,

The Young Champion Wrestler;

OR,

The Colorado Song Queen.

BY MAJOR E. L. ST. VRAIN,
AUTHOR OF "TOMBSTONE TOM," "LEADVILLE
NICK," "REDTOP RUBE," "BRIMSTONE
BOB," "SANCHO PEDRO, THE
BOY BANDIT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE MOUNTAIN TRAIL.

Two men were riding along a pass in the mountains of Colorado. The place was wild and picturesque, and for miles there were no signs of life beyond those afforded by the travelers, though there were evidences in the soil over which they passed that others had journeyed there before them.

Cliffs arose on both sides above them, dark, frowning and precipitous, and one of the travelers looked at them with awe.

"How weak man appears in such a place," he observed.

The other shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"Me feel-a strong enough," he answered. "What-a are these rocks and mountains to Italy? Pigmies! signore, pigmies!"

"Familiarity breeds contempt, and you are accustomed to them, Beppo. To me they are the temples of Nature."

"Me no get-a onto what-a you say, but-a it makes no difference. We ride on!"

"You cannot be more anxious to go than I. The sooner we reach Durango, the better; and then, if my suspicions prove well-grounded—"

Beppo had looked at him keenly from under his heavy, black brows, and listened attentively to every word, but the elder traveler ceased speaking and seemed inclined to fall into thought. But Beppo was devoured by curiosity, and was far from being reconciled to that.

"Will-a you go into business at-a Durango?" he asked.

"No. I go to search for a certain person."

The speaker hesitated for a moment, and then added:

"My wife!"

Beppo dropped his eyes to hide their sparkle.

"Me take to her," he said, encouragingly.

"We will see when I reach the town. I hope to find a wife and a daughter. Ah! my little Viola, will I ever see you again?"

"What-a is her name? Me know-a about every one in Durango; me tell-a you where she lives."

"I may ask your advice anon, Beppo; but just now I have no arrangements to make. I have hired you to guide me there, and I will pay you promptly, as agreed upon."

"The signore is sad-a. Has he had-a trouble with his wife?"

"Trouble?"

"Si, signore."

"Never mind—perhaps I have, perhaps not. I'll tell you anon. How much further to Durango?"

"Two hours will take us to the town-a, signore."

"Very well; ride on. Just at present, I do not care to talk. Leave me to my thoughts, good Beppo, for I want to arrange for the future."

"That is right-a, signore."

Beppo touched his horse and rode a little ahead of his companion, and the two went on in silence, so far as speech was concerned.

There was a strong contrast between the two. The elder man was plainly one entitled to the term "gentleman." His noble, kindly face, his rich dress and easy, distinguished air, were all marks of one in that station of life, while the heavy, white beard, and white hair, which surrounded his face, gave additional force to the idea.

His name was Nathan Comstock, and he was in Colorado for a purpose best known to himself.

His guide was a short, stoutly-built man of middle age. His hair and short, curling beard were jet-black, as were his eyes, and his complexion was almost as swarthy as that of an Indian. A man of the world would have placed his nationality at once by his appearance—he was an Italian.

Beppo was not a prepossessing-looking man. His expression was ugly and sinister. His eyes

were deep-set and overhung by heavy brows, on which grew lashes of unusual length.

Many a timid man would have thought twice before trusting himself with the guide on the mountain trail, but Mr. Comstock had not been in a mood to read faces when he engaged him. Neither had he seen anything suspicious in his actions since then.

But Beppo, as he journeyed on, had dark thoughts in his mind, and he was calmly considering whether he should become a party to a murder.

"The signore is the man I thought-a, and it is now-a the question: How can we make the most-a money? This man will not tell-a why he goes to Durango, and when we get-a there he will probably send-a me away. On the contrary, the signora will pay-a much if we kill-a him. But-a there is a secret, and if the signore is killed, we may-a never know the secret. How can we make the most-a money?"

Beppo grappled with the matter with the zeal of one whose sole object in life is to make money, regardless of the ways and means, and in due time he came to a conclusion. When he did so, he straightened somewhat in the saddle and began to sing in his native language.

He had a very good voice—a remarkably clear, musical and cultivated voice—and the music rung out among the cliffs in a way which even succeeded in arousing Comstock from the melancholy mood into which he had fallen. He could not comprehend a word that was being said, but the melody was apparent, even to an unprofessional ear.

"A wonderful fellow, for this strange land!" he muttered.

Unconscious of the comment, Beppo sung on. As he progressed the song grew wild and thrilling, for it was of the martial days of Italy, and he knew well how to make it effective. Had Comstock suspected it was a signal for his death, he would have admired it less.

A short distance ahead the trail crossed a narrow shelf of rock. From under it gushed a noisy stream which had before been subterranean, and went dashing down a descent of land, forming dark pools as it went.

Back of this place, on a higher point, a man lay on a rock, his gaze fixed lazily on the trail. Sluggish as was his manner, his looks dispelled all idea that he was a mere dreamer. Had he been seen in the penitentiary, people would have said it was the proper place for him.

Suddenly the indolent head was raised and the evil eyes flashed a glance along the eastern trail.

"Begorra, dhe are a-comin', an' Beppo is singin' dhe ould war-song. Dhat settles it; his convoy has got ter kick dhe stool, an' Oi'll come in on dhe up-hate."

He gathered himself up, looked to his rifle and then took position behind a boulder, with his rifle lying along the top, and the muzzle covering the trail.

Nearer came the travelers, clearer sounded the voice of the singer, and then Beppo and his charge emerged from the cover of the cliff. The Italian glanced upward once, but as his keen gaze caught sight of a glimmering at the boulder's top, he nodded lightly and rode on, still singing.

He crossed the natural bridge and Comstock began following, but when half-way across, the sharp crack of a rifle broke the silence and the latter dropped the rein, threw up his hands and reeled in his saddle.

Had his horse kept quiet he would have fallen on the rock, but the animal made such a bound that the rider was flung sideways helplessly.

One moment he was visible, and then a loud splash sounded from the water and only the horse was on the bridge.

Beppo had paused at the sound of the rifle, and as the riderless steed dashed toward him, he coolly caught him by the rein, overcame his brief struggle and led him along the shelf until he reached the place where Comstock had received the shot.

Another man was before him, for the marksman stood gazing into the dark water.

"Where has-a, he gone, Mike?" demanded the Italian.

"Begorra, it's meself is ov dhe opinion he's in dhe lower worruld by dhis time. Dhat str'ame would churrun dhe best mon in dhe kentry to pieces before ye c'u'd say 'Kathleen Mavourneen!'"

Beppo did not answer, but both stood looking eagerly down the slope until all hope vanished of seeing the body appear at that point; but the Italian was of too cautious a nature to be satisfied with the situation. He wished to find

the body and place it where it would never be found by prying eyes.

Accordingly he left the horses in charge of his ally and went down the right bank of the stream, looking in every recess and hoping to find the victim of their cool villainy. The search was unsuccessful, however, and he had to return to the bridge and report accordingly.

"It makes no difference, pard, fur dhe ould haythen is done fur past rel'afe."

"Dead men often tell-a tales, Mike," said the Italian shaking his head. "I like to see my men-a in the grave before I leave-a them."

"Dhis case is all right; dhe str'ame will kape dhe saycret well. At any rate, we can't hang around hyar any longer, or you'll be late in meetin' dhe ould woman."

Beppo looked at the setting sun.

"We will go-a at once," he coincided.

And then Mike mounted the horse thus gained and the pair resumed their way along the trail.

They rode briskly, and from Beppo's air of satisfaction, seemed making just about the time they desired. They halted at last in a gulch, and the Italian again gave his horse in charge of his companion and went forward alone.

He made his way to a recess formed by the jutting side of a cliff. In the darkness no one was visible, but as he approached he was challenged in a voice sharply pitched, but clearly that of a woman.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Only me!" the Italian quickly said. "You know-a me—I am Beppo."

"I know you. Advance and report!"

He obeyed the first part of the order. He found himself near a tall woman. She was dressed in black, and a thick veil covered her face. More could not be told.

"Well, report!" she said, curtly, as Beppo did not speak.

"Me never fail-a. Me told you so at first-a, and now I say: 'The work is done!'"

"Tell me about it."

"I met-a him at the hotel, as I said-a I would do, and it was not hard-a to get the place as guide. He hired me, and we started for Durango together."

"Well?"

"On the way-a, an accident happened him-a, and he stayed behind. He will-a always stay there, for he is dead-a."

"Speak plainly. Did you kill him?" the veiled woman imperiously asked.

"I stabbed him to the heart-a!" was the matter-of-fact response.

There was a moment's silence, and then she laughed harshly.

"You are the prince of assassins; I thought I had made no mistake in you. What became of the body?"

"It is buried under four feet of earth, signora," was the reply; and Beppo could not have spoken more guilelessly had he been telling the truth.

"Enough! Your work is well done, and you shall receive the pay I promised you. You have taken no one into your confidence?"

"No; I trust no one."

"Again I say, enough. Here is the money I promised you, and, before I go, I need only repeat the warning I before gave—do not seek to learn who I am, nor to meddle in any way with my affairs."

"Assuredly I shall not-a; I am content to get my pay-a. But, about the signore; he talked to me, and what-a he said may be of interest to you, signora."

The veiled woman started.

"What did he say?"

"That he was coming to see-a his wife, in Durango."

"What is that to me?"

"He said-a he had had trouble with-a her; that they had quarreled, and that-a she now hated him and might try to kill-a him. I am a faithful man-a, or I might have said: 'Right, signore; the wife is trying to kill-a you.' But I say nothing."

"Why do you tell me of this?"

"I thought perhaps the signora would know something of the wife," said Beppo, insinuatingly.

"That's where you are mistaken. I know nothing about it and care nothing about it. Our work is now done. Good-night!"

"Signora, one word-a—"

"I said good-night! Are you going?"

Near the woman sounded a click he could not fail to recognize as that of a revolver, and without another word he beat a hurried retreat.

He would have remained to argue the matter, but he had an unpleasant feeling that, now he had done the woman's work, she would be only too glad to put a bullet through him and hide crime with crime.

But Beppo was far from being inclined to give up the game, and when he had taken refuge in the dark shadows at the other side of the gulch, he watched for her to leave that he might dog her.

He looked in vain; she did not appear; and when, at last, he moved forward, he found the recess empty. She had slipped away.

"I am foiled!" he muttered, with an ugly smile, "but a I do not give up so easily. I will yet-a know who the signora is; I will know-a her secret; and she shall pay-a me well for keeping it!"

CHAPTER II.

AN ACCOMPLICE WANTED.

"DURANGO DAVE!"

"Present!"

"Hyar's a letter for you."

"Fur me? Look again, my friend; I usually depend on Uncle Sam's Post-office Department for such favors."

"You kin take it or leave it; but if it don't say, 'Durango Dave, present,' I can't read."

"All of which is possible; but I'll look at it. Sure enough—'Durango Dave, present.' Well, I am present now, though I'll be hanged if I was when it was written."

The scene was the saloon of the More Wet Hotel, in the town of Durango, Colorado; the actors were Pony Pete, the bar-keeper, and a young man who was attentively examining the letter he had taken.

He was, judging from appearances, about nineteen years of age, and although not handsome—his features were not regular enough for that—he had a bright, manly face, which would have made him a noticeable character anywhere. His form, too, was good, his dress neat, and though in some places his long hair would have counted against him, that was all right in Colorado.

Plainly, he was somewhat surprised at receiving the letter, but he made no haste to open it. Instead he held it off at arm's length, and looked at it deliberately.

"A feminine hand! Do you observe it, Pony Pete? Possibly, too, you can guess who is the charmer who has been fascinated by me? I never set up for a masher, which makes it all the stranger. Who is she? Age, sixteen; weight, ninety-nine pounds; eyes and hair black—the former the result of a skirmish; her eyes are not to blame for being black. But I'll open it."

He did so, and there he read these words:

"DEAR SIR:—If you will call upon me at my house this evening, I shall be pleased to consult you about a matter which may result to our mutual good. Please come alone, and do not mention this to any one, to oblige,
DOROTHY R. DARKE."

Durango Dave was sufficiently interested and puzzled to read a second time, but no further light could be gained from the note. He knew where Miss Darke lived; she had recently appeared at Durango and hired one of the best houses in town; but the idea that the lady was fascinated was out of the question. She was old enough to be his mother.

Being a young man of prompt action, Dave first decided to go, and then glanced at the clock behind the bar. That showed him that it was time to start on his errand if he was going that evening. He therefore turned abruptly away without another word to the bar-keeper, and left the saloon.

Pony Pete looked after him musingly.

"He ain't so free with his confidence ez he was with his surmises. Reckon thar wa'n't no good in the letter, an' I never heerd o' thar bein' any good in Durango Dave. Thought I wa'n't good enough ter read his durned old letter, did he? I'd like ter ask ther galoot how he gets his livin'."

Whether Pete wished to ask the question or not, he was not likely to do so, for he had a due respect for Dave's muscle, having seen it tried and found all there on several previous occasions; but he was not the only person who wondered how the youth lived.

He had come to the town a year before and there he had remained, but not a day's work had any one known him to do. He obtained the usual reputation of seemingly-idle men, and was generally considered a hard citizen, but no one could mention a bad habit that he had, or prove a thing to his discredit.

When he arrived in town he had a surname, but it had been lost to view when, a little later, after a competitive trial, he was selected to re-

present the town in a wrestling contest against the best man of a rival town, and had won the match in good style. This gave him a strong popularity for a while, and men began to call him "Durango Dave," as their champion should be called; but in time the better class of people began to regard him as an idle good-for-nothing, at the best, while the lower class thought him no better than themselves, but too proud to make free with them.

But no one claimed to understand him fully.

Unconscious of the commotion he had caused in the bar-keeper's mind, the young man walked toward Miss Darke's house. The door was opened by a muscular Irish girl, and when he had given his name he was promptly conducted to the sitting-room, after which she went to notify her mistress.

Durango Dave looked around the room, noticed the elegance and signs of wealth everywhere indicated, and wondered what Miss Darke could want of him.

He was not long left alone.

There was a rustling at the door, as of a silk dress, and Miss Darke entered. She was a bony, angular-faced woman of at least fifty years, and her severity of expression might have indicated that she was an exponent of woman's rights and wrongs—especially the latter, as she understood them.

The caller had politely arisen, but he stood a little surprised and embarrassed as he saw that the lady was not alone. Close behind her followed a second lady, or young girl, and one who presented a marked contrast to her predecessor. She was still on the bright side of twenty, but her form was fully developed and pleasing, and she had a round, full-colored, perfectly-formed face which made her one of the most beautiful girls Dave had ever seen.

For a moment he stared at her unblinkingly, but Miss Darke's stately bow broke the pause and recalled his thoughts.

"This is Mr. Durango Dave, is it not?" she asked, in a voice which was pitched in a lady-like key, if not musically.

"That's my business sign, madam," he replied.

"And I am Miss Darke. This is my niece, Miss Viola Vincent."

Dave made his best bow, while Miss Vincent said she was pleased to see him, at the same time smiling in a way which might have overpowered a head less well-balanced than his.

"I have sent for you on business," continued the elder lady, "and I will proceed to it without delay. You have the reputation of being a bold young man, and it is of such a gentleman I stand in need."

"Well, I don't know as I am ahead of the average, but I am bold enough to look out for number one when my enemies get too brash," modestly answered the young man.

"Exactly; and I presume you could help others when there was money to be made by doing so."

Had the remark been made by a man, Dave would have taken warning at once, but, as it was, he did not suspect anything out of the usual order was afoot.

"Money's a good thing to have, Miss Darke," he admitted.

"Right, sir, right; I am glad you realize it. It is the main lever of the world; the power which moves the world. It was Shakespeare who said, 'Put money in thy purse' and he knew what he was talking about. But, to business: you are probably aware that a traveling theatrical company is about to visit Durango?"

"I couldn't very well be ignorant of the fact when every cabin in town has a poster on it announcing that 'G. B. L. Lewiss's Mammoth Consolidation of the Stars of the Variety Stage' is about to descend upon us."

"Exactly," said Miss Darke, a tinge of venom in her voice; "we are about to have them all—the negro minstrels, trapeze and horizontal bar men, the song-and-dance girls, and all that sort of thing."

"Durango, if you'll allow the expression, will just stand on its hind legs and howl," observed Dave.

"How so?"

"With joy, Miss Darke. Every man in town will be there, and when the treasurer counts up the proceeds, he'll think he has got the earth."

Miss Darke frowned.

"Does Durango know the character of the combination?"

"I didn't know it had one."

"It is the poorest show in the United States," broke in Miss Vincent, spitefully. "I have seen it, and there isn't a decent performer in the company."

"And we thought Durango wouldn't like to patronize such an entertainment," added the elder lady.

"Well, Durango won't throw up its hat and hurrah for a snide show," said Dave, "but I know the town well enough to be sure it will pile in on the eventful evening; and then if the show don't come up to their idea, they will express their disapproval in their usual wild and interesting way."

"But that won't bring their money back. Can't they be warned in time and prevented from going?"

"I don't think they can, Miss Darke; in fact, I know they can't. We don't see a show often enough here to scorn one when it sets up shop; Durango will go, and then if Durango don't like it, she isn't too bashful to say so."

"But if a man of your influence tells them the facts, it ought to keep them away," said Viola. "I wish you would do so."

She looked at him in a captivating way, as she spoke, and he was not wholly unaffected, but it was his pride to be a plain, practical man and he did not forget the fact.

"I should be glad to oblige you, Miss Vincent, but, in the first place, I haven't the influence you ascribe to me—"

"I am sure you have!" broke in Viola. "People call you Durango Dave, the champion of the town, and that means something."

"We'll pass over that. I was about to add that I only aspire to paddle my own canoe, and I can't undertake to direct the theatrical taste of the town. Durango can do as she pleases, and I reckon it will please her to go to the show. Very likely I shall be there myself."

The announcement was made in a matter-of-fact way, tinged with firmness, but the ladies did not seem inclined to abandon their position so easily. Plainly, they had set their minds to the task, and they began an elaborate argument to convince Dave and mold him to their purpose. Money was mentioned, and Viola showered smiles, tender glances and delicate compliments upon him; but they might as well have talked to a rock.

Durango's champion politely declined to interfere, and then, as he saw they really had no more to say, pleaded an engagement and took his leave. By that time all their courtesy had vanished, and when Miss Darke had summoned the maid-of-all-work, she frigidly directed her to "show this person to the door."

The insult implied did not trouble Dave, and he was going out as simply as he had come in when Viola motioned the servant aside, followed Dave into the hall and closed the door behind her.

"May I say one word more?" she asked.

"Certainly; a hundred or two of them."

"I would consider it a personal favor if you would help me in this case, sir."

"Then you must have a personal motive."

"As I said, I dislike to see Durango humbugged."

"Excuse me, miss, but people are not in the habit of being so tender-hearted as that, and I can't get rid of the impression that if you want the show broken up, you must have a spite against it, or its manager, or some of the performers."

A startled look crossed her face, but she seemed to struggle with her feelings, and laid one hand on his arm.

"Do you think so ill of me as that?" she asked.

"Heaven bless you, I wouldn't class it there. We all have our spites, and it's a mighty good person that don't show it when there is a chance. I take the world as I find it."

"Well, even if your idea was correct, and I had a personal spite—would you be so cruel as to refuse to help me in such a simple matter?"

Durango Dave was placed in a trying position. The young lady was very beautiful, and as she stood there with one hand on his arm, and her great eyes showering tender light upon him, he would have been a man of iron had he been indifferent; but he was wise enough to see that she was trying to bend him to her purpose by just these means, and he had no desire to be "played for a fool," as he would have expressed it.

"I'm afraid I would," he frankly answered.

"If A. B. C. Lewiss, or whatever his name is, wants to give a variety performance in Durango, I reckon he has a right to. Bread and butter is what we're all after, and I don't want to break up his combination and throw all the people out of a job. That's all I've got to say, and I'll bid you good-evening!"

He opened the door, raised his hat to her, and then went briskly out; but he had not gone too

soon to see the lovely, pleading face turn to a look of extreme anger; he even thought she turned pale.

"I reckon I'm just in time. If I'd hovered around there a while longer, she'd have tried to scratch my eyes out. But, never mind that; what has she got against the theatrical company? People of their standing don't want to bust up a show they would not deign to see, anyway, without a reason. There's a first-class spite in the case, as I told the pretty tiger-cat; but I reckon it's none of my business. There isn't any one in the company I care for, I think, and as all the boys are interested, I don't believe the females will be able to stop A. B. C. What's-his-name from coining money off of Durango."

CHAPTER III.

"THE MODERN JENNY LIND."

DURANGO DAVE gave very little attention, or thought, to the matter brought to his notice by Miss Darke and her niece, during the three days which followed, but on the fourth it was again brought to his notice by a fragmentary conversation he heard on the street.

Two rough young fellows, of about his own age, met at a point near where he was standing.

"Wal, Tom, be you all ready fur work ter-night?" asked one, a fellow known as Zeke Wiggins.

"I'm always ready," was the reply, "especially when thar is money ter be had. I'm bound ter rake in my shar' o' ther ole maid's shekels, an' I'll storm ther hull outfit, myself, ef necessary."

"You won't need ter. Ther boys is all ready, an' our plans is laid, an' ther minstrels will go outer Durango ther sickest crowd thet ever straddled hoss."

"That's ther figure, an' when thar is fun ahead, you'll always find Turpentine Tom around."

"Let's go over ter ther saloon and take suthin'."

It was an invitation which was not refused, and the precious young scamps walked off.

"So Miss Darke has found her men!" thought Durango Dave. "Well, she couldn't have got worse ones than Zeke Wiggins and Turpentine Tom, but they'll work for her as long as the pay comes in. I'm afraid they'll break up the show. Afraid? Well, yes, that's the size of it; any case is wrong that those fellows take hold of, and I don't know but I ought to warn A. B. C. What's-his-name. No, I won't; it ain't my requiem. Hold on! I'll compromise; I'll wait till the promised street-parade, and all will depend on whether the outfit looks like a solid thing or a snide."

For a street-parade was promised on the bills, circus-fashion, and wisely, too, for all Durango had decided to turn out to see it.

Dave then walked on to the bill-board and read the list of attractions again. There were gymnasts, in performances on trapeze and horizontal bar; a ventriloquist; Ethiopian "kings of the minstrel line;" various young ladies, with romantic names, in song-and-dance acts; and various other attractions.

"Reads all right," muttered Durango Dave, "but you can't always tell by the amount of powder how much shot is in the gun. I'll wait for further developments!"

Afternoon came, and with it G. B. L. Lewisson's "Mammoth Combination." The streets were well populated soon after a watchman announced their approach, and then all waited with unflagging interest.

Durango Dave was in the crowd, and he noticed Zeke Wiggins and Turpentine Tom there, too. Several of their boon companions were near them, but there was no evidence that they intended immediate mischief.

Beyond a doubt, it was their idea to wait until night.

"The Mammoth Combination" rode down the street with G. B. L. Lewisson at its head. All the people were there in stage costume, so far as was practicable, and they made a really gay and gallant appearance, so much so that the crowd broke into cheering.

They liked to have it known that Durango could appreciate a good thing when they saw it.

Dave could not but admire the procession himself, and it did not impress him up to that time as being a "snide" affair. If the people did as well on the boards as in the saddle, it would be pretty conclusively proven that Miss Darke's assertions were unfounded.

Being an admirer of horses, he gave as much attention to them as to the riders, and he noticed

that several were spirited animals which arched their necks and took an unnecessary number of fancy steps in moving along.

Suddenly a vicious dog belonging to one of the miners, which had apparently come to see the parade, seemed to be struck by a vicious impulse, and he bounded at one of the prancing steeds with a howl which would have done credit to a small lion. It was more than the mettlesome horse could stand, and with one swing he changed his course and made a break for the spectators.

Durango Dave was just in his path, but he could easily have escaped. Instead of doing so, however, he saw that just behind him were several women and children, and that there was small chance of the rider—a girl—being able to control the frightened animal before he would plunge into the crowd. If this was done, it would be a miracle if no serious accident occurred.

The young man thought quickly, and then, without stirring from his tracks, he threw up one hand and caught the rein of the horse. Great strength rested in his arms and the flight of the animal was checked, but it was not ready to give up so easily. There was a struggle which was stubborn while it lasted, but Dave clung to his hold and the brute mind seemed to recognize the superiority of the human one.

The horse became passive, and Dave released his hold, raised his hat and looked up at the rider.

He never forgot that moment. He looked and stood with the expression on his face fixed as though frozen.

He had seen the face before!

On the part of the girl, her own expression seemed to answer his own; it was clear the recognition was mutual; but before either had recovered sufficiently from the surprise to speak, a commanding, though not ungracious, voice broke the stillness.

"Fall into line, Miss Aldene! Bruno is now all right."

The girl pulled on the rein, in a mechanical way, and Bruno responded graciously and took his former place, while the procession moved on.

Durango Dave, however, saw nothing that came later. He remained nearly motionless, but, as long as she was visible, he watched the girl he had thus met. She made a fine appearance as she rode, for her figure was not only perfect, but she sat in the saddle with a grace few equestriennes ever gain.

The name by which she had been addressed revealed her identity professionally. Dave remembered the department of the poster on which it was announced that "Miss Edna Aldene, the modern Jenny Lind," would appear in her serio-comic songs, but it was not as such that he had known her in the past.

Still he said nothing, and when the company had passed, he left the street and slowly made his way back to the More Wet Hotel. His mind was busy with the past and the unexpected meeting, and it was not for some time that he again thought of the contemplated work of Zeke Wiggins and his followers.

When he did, he became suddenly interested.

"So this is the show they're going to break up, is it? A show to which little Bianca—I mean Miss Aldene—belongs. Well, perhaps they are; but things have changed since the last presidential election, and I reckon I'll take a hand in the matter. If Alphabet Lewisson gets laid out, it'll be because he won't listen to me. The sooner he knows the racket the better it'll be for him!"

So saying, the young man hastily arose and started for The Kennel. This was one of the largest buildings in the place, with a saloon, billiard-room and bowling alley on the first floor, and a hall on the second, which could be utilized for dancing or for theatrical purposes.

This was the room where the entertainment was to take place.

The entrance to the hall was at one corner of the building, and as Durango Dave neared it he saw several of the youth of the town standing around it. Even in that remote place they had the truly metropolitan habit of forming a noble army at the theater door.

A second glance showed him that it was Zeke Wiggins and his gang, and, as he wished them to remain ignorant of the fact that the theatrical people were forewarned, he would have turned aside had he not perceived that the whole crowd were looking at him sharply.

To retreat then would surely arouse their sus-

picious and, very likely, cause them to think he was afraid to venture when they were there.

He could not bear to be thought a coward, and marched straight ahead, with an air of easy indifference.

Zeke was directly in front of the door, and he showed no inclination to move. Instead, he looked belligerently at Dave, with whom he had never been on good terms.

"Whar be you goin'?" he growled.

"Up-stairs," coolly answered Durango's champion.

"Fell in love with some o' ther ballet gals, hev ye?"

"Well, I'm not on the confession this week, but I don't mind saying I have not. I won't interfere with any game you have on hand in that direction."

"I ain't got none."

"Oh! I didn't know but you had. Well, good-day, then, for I am going up."

Dave spoke carelessly, and at the same time moved ahead, but Zeke did not get out of the way. On the contrary, he put out one hand to stop further advance.

"Wait a bit!" he said.

"If you've got business, fire away. I'm in a hurry."

"We don't want ye ter go up thar."

"Who is 'we'?"

"This whole outfit. We object."

"Strikes me your outfit is getting rather fresh. I'd like to inquire what they've got to do with my business?"

"Wal, these hyar ballet folks ain't ter our taste, and we don't want Durango people ter visit 'em."

"You're mighty modest in your requests. Why don't you ask for the earth and be done with it? All samee, I am going up, Ezekiel, and I'll trouble you to make way!"

Wiggin had been speaking in a dictatorial tone, but, except for a slight sarcasm, Dave remained as cool as an iceberg. He did not wish for trouble, but he had no intention of letting the young rough lay down the law to him.

As he again moved forward, however, Zeke thrust his hand against his breast, half as a blow and half as a push, and Dave promptly caught his wrist and, giving him a quick swing, sent him whirling several feet away, where he struck his foot against an obstruction and fell to the ground.

He was up again in a short time, his eyes blazing with wrath and hot words on his lips, but Durango Dave was already passing through the door.

The young rascal leaped forward in pursuit.

Dave might easily have escaped by hastening his speed, as the stairs were just ahead of him, but he would not run, and he turned at bay in the little space between the door and stairway.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed, speaking sharply for the first time. "You've gone far enough, Zeke Wiggins, with your meddling. I want no more of it. I don't allow any man to run the ropes for me, and you had better keep away, now."

"Curse ye, how dared you push me?" snarled Wiggins.

"If you take my chest for a base-drum, you make a big chronological error, sir. What's the matter with you, anyway? Have you raised too much wetness in the Kennel for your good, or what's the racket?"

Zeke's fighting-blood was up, but Turpentine Tom knew that trouble at this stage of affairs would do their cause more harm than good. Perhaps they would get arrested and locked up, just when they wanted to get to work, and he had been whispering his ideas in Zeke's ears.

Better let Dave go for them and do his worst, than to make a bad matter worse.

Wiggins yielded to this argument, but he still felt the smart of his humiliation in having been felled in the presence of the men among whom he aspired to reign as a "chief," and he could not forego a last word.

"Have yer own way fur now, Durango Dave; you kin go up-stairs, or you kin go ter perdition; but don't ye doubt that you'll hear from me ag'in. I'll be squar' with ye yet, or my name hain't Zeke Wiggins. Durn ye, I'll make mince-meat o' ye!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE CHAMPION'S WARNING.

DURANGO DAVE smiled quietly at the threat. "I don't hanker for gore, and don't believe in fighting," he coolly answered, "but if you really want to let loose the dogs of war, why, I'll try to catch on by the rail when the train goes past. Until then, so long!"

And he turned and walked deliberately upstairs.

The "Mammoth Combination" had possession of the hall, and all the people were there, and he was not sure they would welcome intruders, but he knew when his business was made known it would change the situation anyway.

He opened the door and walked in, but the scene before him was one which caused him to pause in some bewilderment. The hall was literally alive with activity, for not only were the girls there and laughing and talking, but the men were unpacking the articles needed for the performance, and Dave vaguely thought of the "Old Curiosity Shop," a book he had not failed to read.

Suddenly a hush fell upon the scene. He had been discovered. The girls suddenly became as mute as so many statues, but their gazes were bent on the intruder, and there was a sparkle in their eyes no statue ever had.

The men, too, ceased work, and Dave saw that it was time for him to go to the front. He advanced, and just then one of the party came forward to meet him. He had the air of a man in power, and Dave placed him at once.

"Is this Mr. Lewisson?" he asked.

"That is my name, sir," was the pleasant reply.

"Then I have a word to say to you in private. I am not blowing a bugle, nor have I anything brash to propose, but something to your interest."

Lewisson was an experienced manager, and in his travels through the border towns he had met with such strange incidents that nothing surprised him. He decided that this sturdy young fellow had some suggestion to offer which he, the young man, believed would enhance the value of the entertainment. Several years "on the road" had shown the manager that the less people knew about theatrical matters the more they thought they knew, and he prepared to listen to a piece of mild advice with his usual suavity.

Consequently he invited the young man to step aside with him and explain his business.

"First of all," began Dave, "are you running a first-class show?"

The manager looked a little shocked.

"Certainly, sir—certainly. Our constellation of stars cannot be excelled. We have the Parzoretti Brothers, in their daring acrobatic—"

"I have read the bills," calmly interrupted Durango's champion. "Next, are you a man of sand?"

Mr. Lewisson had been too long in the West to be ignorant of the meaning of the speaker's last word.

"I think my courage is equal to the average," he replied, smiling.

"Well, you'll need it in Durango!"

The manager's face clouded.

"How so?"

"Because there's a game on foot to freeze you out."

"Freeze us out?"

"Yes, and worse than that—to break up the outfit."

Lewisson was fully interested at last.

"Good gracious! You don't say so! By whom? How?"

"Well, I can't give you all the points, for I'm not behind the throne; but I'll tell you just what I know about it, and then you can draw your own conclusions and fight it out."

And then the youth proceeded to give a plain, straightforward account of his interview with Miss Darke, and the reasons he had for believing the woman had since found a ready tool in the person of Zeke Wiggins.

The manager listened, but his face bore a look of doubt rather than apprehension. Dave saw that he looked at him sharply, and now and then scanned him from head to foot, and he knew very well his veracity was doubted. Still, he did not change his calm, matter-of-fact tone, and had it not been that Edna Aldene was with the troupe, he would have taken no pains to convince him.

But, while he talked, he occasionally glanced toward the girls, and he saw that Edna stood apart from them, regarding him closely, and he suspected she would not let him go away without speaking to him.

For her sake, he hoped the manager would be warned in time and run no risk of being "run out" of town.

"This seems incredible," said Lewisson, at the end of the story. "What object can this Miss Darke have in wanting to injure my combination?"

"I really don't know."

"Her excuse that Durango ought not to patronize us because the show is a poor one, is absurd. In the first place it's not poor, and, secondly, what would Miss Darke care if it was? She wouldn't come to see us, anyway, I dare say, for elderly ladies are not partial to the variety stage—though all of my people are thoroughly respectable. Look at the song and dance girls! Don't they look like ladies?"

Durango Dave thought they did, especially that one of them before mentioned, but the skeptical tone of the manager had, really, annoyed him, and he dryly answered:

"There is a resemblance, I perceive."

"No New England village can furnish a more respectable gathering!" warmly added Mr. Lewisson.

"Nobody has worked in a criticism on that point, that I am aware of, but you can digest what I really have said, and act your own pleasure. I thought I'd drop in and tell you, and now that I've done so, I'll drop out."

Dave spoke stiffly, and was turning away, but Lewisson spoke hurriedly:

"Wait a moment, please. Who, and what, is this Miss Darke?"

"Well, I haven't the family history, and all I can tell is that she lives in good style at the further side of the village, is reputed well-to-do financially, and has lived there for a year."

"It seems incredible that a woman should have a vendetta against us."

Durango Dave made no reply.

"What's your theory, young man?"

"I told her, at the time, she was speaking with a crooked tongue, and that she had a personal grudge against you, or some member of the company."

"What did she say?"

"Do you suppose she confessed? Not any; she isn't a fool. She denied it."

"Don't you think you misunderstood her?"

"Misunderstood your grandfather!" retorted Dave, in supreme disgust. "Perhaps I dreamed the whole case, or read it in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. My good man, you don't seem to catch on, exactly. I don't ask you to believe me, for it isn't my festival, anyhow; but I thought decency required me to put you on the racket. If you don't believe me, all well and—"

"My dear sir," interrupted Lewisson, hastily, "I meant no offense, but it is hard to believe such a thing about a woman without proof."

"Perhaps you want the earth, but it can't always be had. But, don't think that I am kicking; I don't run this menagerie, and I don't care a picayune whether she goes up in blue flame or not."

Once more he turned away, but again the manager stopped him and reiterated that he meant no harm in a way which considerably mollified Durango Dave. Lewisson intended to be a gentleman, and he expressed himself in such a way that Dave could not very well bear malice.

When, for the third time, he turned to depart, it was in better humor, and when he saw Edna Aldene coming toward him, all resentment vanished.

"The modern Jenny Lind," was a very pretty girl, of the brunette type, and the young man felt a thrill no other girl in Colorado could have aroused in his practical being.

She advanced with a charming look, half-eager, half-embarrassed, on her face.

"I want to thank you for stopping my horse to-day," she said. "If it hadn't been for your presence of mind, some of the children would have been seriously injured, and it might have been the same with me. I am very much obliged, for Bruno is a vicious animal when aroused."

"I am glad to have helped you, Miss Aldene, but such things are common in the West."

"But you seem to have a particular faculty for such things. I have not forgotten that you rescued me once before, when I was a child."

Durango Dave smiled. All his usual indifference and reserve were gone.

"Do you remember that?" he asked.

"Do I remember it? Shall I ever forget?"

"I confess I hope not. I don't want to be regarded as a fighting man, even for your sake, but I would be glad to be remembered for my own."

"Ah! can I forget you? Never! I was then a child, ignorant, unhappy, ill-fed and ill clothed, and your kindness was a new era in my life. Before, I had lived in darkness; after that, I knew something of human kindness, and my soul expanded until life became more of a reality than a dark dream."

The smile was gone from her face, her dark

eyes looked like stars half-concealed by sable robes, and her voice was low, thrilling, earnest.

Durango Dave gazed at her sympathetically, though he only half comprehended what was in a mind less practical than his own.

"What has become of Conrado?" he asked.

Edna shivered.

"I ran away from him, years ago. He was cruel, and used to beat me so that I could not bear it, and I fled soon after I met you."

"You told me then he was not your father. Then how came you with him?"

"I never knew. My first recollections are of being in his charge, but, though he never claimed to be my father, he always refused to say who was. I have not seen him for five years, and I pray Heaven I never may again—though I still dream of him, at times, and start when I hear a voice like his. I am always dreading to see him again, but my fears may be groundless. But, excuse me, I cannot talk longer now, for we are all very busy. We are to be here three nights—shall I see you again?"

She asked the question timidly, but Dave promptly replied:

"You certainly will, if you will allow me to visit you."

"I shall be glad to see you. We stop at the hotel, and you have only to send your name."

"I shall do that. You remember the name—David Marriner. Here, however, they call me Durango Dave."

"I have heard you mentioned as the champion of the town."

"A fancy of theirs, Miss Aldene. One word more before I go. I have just warned Alphabet Lewisson, there, that I fear an attempt will be made to break up the show by a gang of roughs. He scoffed at the idea, but I want to mention it in a quiet way to you, and to say that if trouble comes, you'll find me on hand to protect you."

The manly assertion produced a visible effect on the girl, who then thanked him again, but as he had no time to give particulars, she was not impressed to any great degree. Attempts had before been made against the company in rough towns, but Lewisson had always brought them out of it in good style.

The young people said good afternoon, and then Durango Dave left the place. He expected to find Zeke Wiggins and his men at the door, but the only person visible was a dark-faced man who first looked at him eagerly and then came forward.

"Is this a Durango Dave?" he asked.

"This-a is, my amiable friend," Dave answered, looking dubiously at his dark face.

"Then I want-a to speak-a with you."

CHAPTER V.

BEPPA WANTS INFORMATION.

DURANGO DAVE had before seen the Italian at the village, and he had always regarded him as a man upon whom suspicion would not be misplaced, but it suited his fancy just then to hear the fellow talk.

"Well, if you've got anything worth the breath, you can fire away," he answered to the last remark.

"Come in-a the Kennel!"

They entered the saloon. At the first end was a bar and a few tables; at the further end a chance for those who were inclined to play billiards; and at the further table he saw Zeke Wiggins and his followers deeply engaged in pool.

They took no notice of the new-comers, however, and Dave and Beppo sat down at a table and the latter called for two glasses of whisky. Durango's champion surprised him by politely declining to drink, but the matter was not pressed.

"I want to ask-a if you know-a the signora named Miss Darke," said the Italian, bluntly.

"Do you? My friend, all you need is a few thousand votes and just a little more modesty to be a Congressman."

"I do not understand-a."

"No?"

"No, for you talk in riddles."

"That's my gentle way."

"But I ask-a you a question. Do you know-a the signora?"

"If the information will cheer your heart, no!"

"You-a go there once."

"Well, hadn't I a right to?"

"Be calm-a. I don't wish-a to offend you. I have a reason for what I ask-a. I would know about the lady."

"What about her?"

Dave maintained a careless air, but he was watching Beppo with a keenness born by his recent experience with the amiable lady of whom they spoke. He could not but connect the two circumstances.

"Is the signora married?"

"Well, really, I haven't the record, so I can't say. It is possible *she* may know, and I advise you to ask her."

"Can't you tell-a?"

"No."

"I am willing to pay-a for what you say," observed Beppo, insinuatingly.

"Why do you want to know?"

The Italian held up both hands.

"Don't ask me to tell-a. Am I to blame that-a I have seen her and-a worshipped?"

The idea seemed so absurd to Dave that he laughed aloud.

"I'm not your judge, and you can worship all you choose, but you needn't expect me to do your wooing. 'Faint heart never won fair lady,' and if you want the earth you must go for it."

"But I want-a to know about her."

"Friend Maccaroni, you have the persistence of a pile-driver, and I don't see why you can't win the gentle Dorothy, but I tell you once and for all that I know nothing about her—"

Durango Dave stopped suddenly. He had caught sight of a man who had cautiously approached behind him, and was listening to all he said, and the discovery filled him with sudden wrath. Anything so contemptible was not to his liking, and the man so plainly betrayed his guilt that the youth abruptly arose and wheeled upon him.

"Hallo, you!" he exclaimed, "what are you doing here?"

"Begorra, it's me opinion I'm doin' nothing," was the reply.

"Well, it's my opinion you were trying hard to do something. I don't allow any galoot to steal an audience on me. I'll trouble you to get out on the jump!"

The detected listener knew his proper way was to keep cool, but he had a hot temper, and it flared up at these words.

"Go to dhe Ould Nick!" he retorted. "No man is me master, an' I shall do ez I pl'ase!"

"You'll take yourself out from under my chair, or I'll make you. This place is free to all, but I swear that when there is ample room here, I'm not going to have you creep up behind me like a cat and take in the essence of my oration. Here are six other tables; take either one of them, but don't keep at your tricks."

Thus far Beppo had listened in silence, but he now pressed to the front.

"A thousand pardons, signore, but this man is a friend of mine. He was coming to talk-a with me."

"So you're in cahoots, are you? It's the first time I ever knew an Italian and an Irishman to agree, but you look like worthy chums. Well, take your friend, for I'll be hanged if I want to hob-nob with either one of such a pair of cut-throats!"

Beppo uttered an oath in his native language.

"Don't say-a that!" he added, shrilly. "No man shall call-a me a cut-throat, and you are a boy with no beard-a on your face."

"So you object? Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"Me whip-a you!"

"Where are your tools?" sarcastically asked the youth.

Up to this time the bar-keeper had heard in silence, but as he saw that there was really danger of a fight, he came forward with the intention of making peace among his guests. Wiggins and his friends, too, ceased their pool-playing, and all moved forward to see the end of the trouble.

Beppo's blood was up, and as the weapon of his countrymen was never beyond his reach, he drew a long, glittering knife with a jerk.

It was enough to chill the bar-keeper's blood, and he went over the bar with the quickness of an acrobat.

No sooner had the Italian drawn the weapon than he made haste to use it, and he leaped toward Durango Dave with a hiss like that of a snake.

The youth had hardly expected matters to come to this pass, but he made it a rule to never be off his guard, and as Beppo made his rush he slipped quickly to one side and avoided him. Unfortunately, in so doing, he came within reach of Mike's arm, and the Irishman at once endeavored to lay hold of him.

Something frustrated his intention, and this something was in the shape of the fist of Durango Dave suddenly swinging around. Mike

made an acrobatic flight, fell over a chair and proceeded to roll in the dust which covered the floor.

Had it not been for this interruption Dave would have had his revolver out and speedily brought Beppo to terms, but, by this time, the latter had recovered his balance and turned again.

The youth's back was toward him, and he raised his knife for a straight, sharp thrust between his shoulders. One blow and the stricken man would never trouble him more; it would not be the first time Beppo had stabbed a man in the back.

In this case, however, he missed making his point.

Durango Dave wheeled just in time, and caught the Italian's wrist in an iron grasp. One moment there was a tableau, and then Beppo had a practical illustration of the way in which his young adversary won the right to be called the Durango champion.

He was seized in a hold he could not break, swung clear of the floor and projected forward like a missile, and as Mike chanced to be in the line of his flight, both men went over upon the floor.

"Hold up, thar! Keep whar ye be, or you'll hear me sing Yankee Doodle in yer ears!"

Once more Dave wheeled. He saw a man who stood six feet in his boots, and, in his loose miner's dress, looked like a veritable gladiator. In each hand he held a leveled revolver, but the muzzles were not turned on the youth.

Instead, they pointed beyond, to where Zeke Wiggins and his followers had been hurrying up, billiard-cues in hand, to take part in the *melee*, and it was not hard to surmise that their efforts would be against Dave.

"Hold on, I say, an' let me sound my anthem!" added the new-comer. "I'm Solo Sam, ther Sweet Singer o' Coiorado, an' when my music-box gets in motion your teeth'll ache on ther key o' G, ef you don't stand from under!"

Despite this exaggerated address, it was clear the stranger was in earnest, and as Dave noticed the honest humor expressed on his face, he stepped to his side.

"Are you with me in this?" he tersely asked.

"Until ther last note is played, let ther tune be in double G. Solo Sam don't take water fur no galoot in tuer West."

By this time Beppo was on his feet.

"Death!" he gasped, "how dare you touch-a me? Worm of the earth! I'll cut-a out your heart-a and feed it to the dogs!"

"Oh, go ter Jericho!" retorted Solo Sam, good-humoredly. "Yer can't-a carve me for a cent a, you bet-a your-a bottom red a. Oh! you blamed heathen, why don't you hev yer song set ter music in the United States dialect!"

The Italian flourished his knife wildly, but Sam and Dave stood side by side, revolver in hand, and he was not fool enough to court certain destruction.

"I will kill-a you!" he said shrilly.

"Suit yer own convenience ez ter that. I don't keer a red when you hev ther concert, ef only yer keep time when ye do it."

"Jack Jenkins," interrupted Zeke Wiggins, "do you allow sech a rumpus ez this in yer place?"

The bar-keeper's head arose about three inches above the bar.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am engaged, at present, so I can't chip in, and I'd suggest that ef you do any shootin', ye don't turn yer sixes this way. It might break the bottles!"

And then his head disappeared again.

Durango Dave and his new pard were outnumbered, but they had the advantage of drawn weapons, and no one cared to tempt them. Beppo and Mike were brave enough, but they were not so foolish as to run deliberately against a bullet. In such cases, they preferred to be found with the "drop" in their favor.

"Well," said Dave, coolly, as no further demonstration was made, "what are you going to do about it?"

"Me kill-a you some day!" reiterated Beppo.

"Begorra, yes, an' thin wipe the ground all up wid yez, afterward!" added Mike.

"That's all right, so far as it goes, but if you are not on your slash now, we will bid you good day. We are interrupting these gentlemen who were playing pool, and I have business elsewhere."

"I'll go 'long, too," said Solo Sam. "I didn't git no programme, but ef ther show is over, I'll go out an see a man."

No one answered, though Beppo was fingering his knife in a nervous way, and the new friends beat a retreat to the door in good order. But they left revengeful hearts behind them.

CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING MEETING.

WHEN the Mammoth Combination had arranged everything in good order for the evening performance, the members thereof adjourned to the More Wet Hotel. This place was to be their quarters while they remained, and the first thing was to get supper.

Mr. Lewisson did not forget Durango Dave's warning, but everything seemed to indicate that it was unfounded. All the people acted very friendly, and he decided that he was perfectly safe; but, to settle the matter, he asked the opinion of the landlord of the More Wet.

Unluckily, Mr. Biggs did not like Dave. His reason was simply that the youth, after boarding with him for some time, had changed to a rival establishment, but it was enough to make Biggs venomous; and when so good a chance was offered, he not only scoffed at Dave's warning, but gave the young man a character none too good.

Among the rest, he said he was a "champion liar," and the manager came to the conclusion the warning had simply been meant as a hoax, and no precautions were taken to avert the threatened trouble.

Shortly after supper, Edna Aldene and another girl belonging to the company, whose name was Jessie Jordan, left the hotel and walked down the street. Miss Jordan had discovered that she needed some feminine trifle for use on the stage that evening, and she had asked Edna to accompany her. Edna would have preferred to remain in-doors, for she remembered the warning of Durango Dave; but as she had not been given particulars, she decided that no harm could occur during so short a walk as that to the store.

So she agreed to accompany her friend.

Their purchases were made, and they started home. Thus far they had met few people, and though those they did see stared rather too freely, no one addressed them.

As they went on, however, they approached a man, who was coming down the street in an opposite direction. He was walking quietly, and there was nothing about him to attract unusual attention; and it was not until he stopped short, a few feet away, that Edna looked at him closely.

When she did so she recoiled, and her face became suddenly pale. Her look of terror surprised Jessie; but a silence followed, for the man stood perfectly still, gazing stupidly.

Then a look of intelligence flashed over his face.

"Bianca!" he exclaimed.

Edna did not answer. She longed to flee, but her limbs seemed as useless as stone columns, and she could only stare at the swarthy, evil face before her.

Its owner was Beppo, but the look of triumph on his visage was one we have never seen before. Had he fallen heir to a fortune, he could not have been more pleased.

"It is Bianca, little Bianca, the child-a I reared!" he added, in a purring tone. "Ah! my little girl-a, my heart has been sore without you."

Still Edna remained silent, but Jessie saw her alarm and spoke sharply:

"Go away! Nobody wants you here!"

"I will talk-a with my little girl-a," said Beppo, with suave persistency. "She know-a me; she know-a Conrado, whose name is now Beppo, and she know-a he is her best friend."

"Friend!" echoed Edna, bitterly. "So is a rattlesnake, my friend. Great Heavens, I would rather see any man on earth! Keep away from me—I am going!"

She started, but the Italian barred her way.

"No, no, don't go, little Bianca! Don't leave your old friend-a, Conrado. Think of the past a. Do you remember how we used to sing-a in the streets of New York—I with my hand-organ, you with your tambourine. Aha! we made much-a money in those days, and we were vera happy."

"Happy! My life was a nightmare!" shivered the girl. "Do you think I have forgotten how you used to beat me, or how you would send me to bed supperless when our gains were not what you desired?"

"Ah! woe is me, we were poor, vera poor!"

"It is false. You always had money in abundance. You had enough to gamble half the night, at any rate."

"It was for you, Bianca, for you. I would have made you a fine lady. For you I slaved, oh! vera hard. You would have had it all-a."

"You can't deceive me. I understood you then; I understand you better now. Out of my

way, Conrado, for I am in haste, and I have no desire to renew your acquaintance. Let me pass!"

Edna spoke firmly. The first shock of her surprise was past, and the latent courage of her nature arose to the surface. She was resolved not to have anything whatever to do with the dark-faced Italian, and the sooner she left his presence, the more at ease she would feel.

Beppo was far from being reconciled to the idea, and he would have seized her had he dared, but he knew he could not take both girls, and the remaining one would rend the air with her cries.

"One moment!" he answered. "You shall go, but before you do so, promise me one thing—a. I want-a to talk with my little Bianca; meet me somewhere, and let us speak of the old days. I swear no one shall-a harm you, and that you shall-a go home when you want to."

"I will not! Great Heavens! I would as soon trust myself with a jaguar. Let me pass."

She was pushing past him, but he caught her arm.

"You shall not!" he hissed. "I am not to be scorned thus! You shall wait till you will speak-a fair to me."

"Friend Maccaroni, that's where you make your mistake!"

The words sounded in Beppo's ears, and a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder. He wheeled like a flash, at the same time laying his hand on his ready knife. He stood face to face with Durango Dave.

"You're not running this festival," the youth coolly added, "and I'll trouble you to let up on your bazoo. These young ladies want to go home, and they're going. D'ye catch on?"

"Death of my life!" gasped Beppo. "I will kill-a you!"

Once more his knife was drawn with a jerk and he prepared to spring forward, but Dave had by that time learned his tactics, and he had no idea of being carved after the fashion of Italy.

Instead, he leaped forward himself, and the Italian's arm was seized before he could make a motion. Then Dave's leg somehow became entangled with that of the bravo, and the latter found himself lying on his back with the champion wrestler kneeling on his breast.

"There you are, and there you will remain until some of the fire-and-brimstone gets quieted in your bosom. You black dog! you not only aspire to murder men, but you molest women, do you?"

"I will kill-a you!" hissed Beppo.

"Strikes me I have heard the observation before. You're a regular butcher, with your tongue and if you had a free rope, you'd make Colorado one howling wilderness, wouldn't you?"

Beppo writhed like a maimed and helpless snake.

"I want-a revenge!" he declared.

"Why don't you ask for the moon?"

The Italian closed his eyes, threw back his head, and pounded the ground with his heels. It almost seemed that, in his impotent rage, he was likely to go into convulsions.

His youthful conqueror tossed his knife away and then suddenly arose.

"You can get up, but I give you fair warning that you'd better behave yourself. Next time I get a rap at you, you won't fare so well. No brashness now!"

The Italian rose to a sitting position, but he made no movement to regain his feet. He had tried the mettle of Durango's champion and found it all there, and he did not care to try it on again until the odds were in his favor. So he sat still, but the gathering shadows of night did not wholly hide the demoniacal expression on his swarthy face.

"Ladies," said Dave, raising his hat, "I will see you safely to your home, if you will allow me."

Neither thought of objecting, and Miss Jordan looked admiringly at their champion. It seemed strange to her that a beardless youth could thus subdue such a man as Beppo, but that only served to strengthen her esteem for him.

Edna had known him longer and was less surprised. She remembered the time when, as a boy of thirteen, he had championed her cause in New York, on the Bowery, when Conrado, *alias* Beppo, attempted to punish her on the street because she notified a man who accidentally gave her a two-dollar-and-a-half gold piece for a penny, of his mistake.

The boy had shown his courage then; it was not strange that, at nineteen, he was Durango's champion—and hers.

He accompanied them to the hotel, but, so

much time had elapsed, they had a chance to say but little. The girls had only time enough to join their companions and go to the theater, to take part in the performance.

Dave did, however, find time to repeat his warning, and to say that he should be at the hall, and if trouble occurred, would defend her.

They parted at the hotel door, and then the young man went to his own room to prepare for the emergency. For the combination, as such, he cared but little; but he was resolved to keep Edna from harm.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST NIGHT IN DURANGO.

EIGHT o'clock was the hour fixed for the opening of the theatrical entertainment, and the moment the doors were open the man in the box-office had all he could do to make change. Anticipations of a packed house seemed likely to be realized; the business was simply immense.

Among those who paid their money at the door was Durango Dave. He might have had company of either sex, but he preferred to go alone.

Almost the first persons he saw when he had found a seat were Zeke Wiggins, Turpentine Tom, and their gang, who had secured front seats, and who were as plainly bent on mischief as the other people were on amusement of a respectable kind.

Dave remembered how stubbornly Lewisson had refused to listen to him, and had it not been for Edna, he would have been indifferent to the loss the manager might sustain.

Other familiar faces were there. Sitting near one side were Beppo and Mike, and the interested look on the former's face showed that he had suspected the fact that "Bianca" was to be found with the variety company.

Two other figures attracted Dave's attention, though, as they had selected a place where their faces were in shadow, he might not have noticed them had he not been looking particularly; but when he discovered them, the fact that they wore vails aroused all his suspicions and he decided that they were Miss Darke and Viola Vincent.

"It's confounded odd!" he thought. "I can't, to save my boots, imagine why such high-toned dames have an interest in Alphabet Lewisson's show. But if the dogs of war are let loose, I reckon the old man won't turn up his patrician nose at me so much henceforth."

The house filled up; the opening hour arrived; the curtain arose, showing several colored men—colored in the fullest sense of the term—on the stage, with end-men for the chief feature, though Lewisson, sitting in the middle of the half-circle, made rather an imposing appearance.

The entertainment opened, and remarks supposed to be jokes became the rage. Some were very good; there were gray-haired miners in the audience who had liked them when they were new, twenty-five years before; but though they were old friends resurrected with unseemly levity from their graves, they took well, and the hall shook with applause.

Durango Dave used his eyes in the meanwhile. He saw that Wiggins and his followers were loud in expression of approval; that Beppo sat with an absent, waiting expression on his face; and that the veiled women never seemed to stir during the event.

The second feature of the evening was the feats of the Parzoretti brothers on trapeze and horizontal-bar. These gentlemen were supposed to be of the same land as Beppo, but, had the truth been known, the old expression, "Italians from Cork," would have fitted them well, for by birth, the grace of Providence and fact, they were really named O'Brien, but it also remained a fact that they were fairly good in their specialties.

They appeared clad in their gaudy stage-costumes, and as they bowed to the audience the latter responded with encouraging applause.

The gymnasts then advanced to beneath the trapeze and went up companion ropes hand over hand. On reaching the top each flung a leg over the bar, grasped the side, and briskly endeavored to gain a sitting position in concert.

Attempted it, but did not succeed, for, to the horror of Lewisson, who was watching from behind the scenes, one lost his balance and fell heavily to the floor, while the other barely managed to cling in an ungraceful way.

The fallen man was not injured, and in a moment he was on his feet and again ascending. This time he was more cautious, and he retained

his balance, but it was with the awkwardness of an amateur that the pair gained their seats, while their dismayed looks suggested that something was wrong.

"Get a cow to do the act!" suggested a voice, in the audience.

Lewisson was shocked, but he hoped the Parzorettis would turn the tide by some unusually brilliant work. They surely would, for he had never known them to fail.

On the contrary, they whispered together for a moment; then both deserted their places and slid to the floor. A murmur of disgust ran through the audience, and Durango Dave noticed that Wiggins and his men, while not otherwise showing their hostility, gave their voices with emphasis.

Lewisson hurriedly advanced to meet his men, and though what was said was not audible beyond the stage, the matter seemed explained in a few words.

The manager advanced to the front.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, excitedly, "there has been foul play here. The trapeze has been greased. Some enemy has taken this way to injure us!"

There was a moment's silence, and then, as it dawned upon the people that, if anything of the kind had happened, it must have been done by the citizens of the town, and that Durango was attacked, the honest miners resented the indirect charge.

"Tell that ter ther marines!"

"Don't spring any cobweb lies on this crowd!"

"Get some wooden men, and see if they can hang on!"

These and other shouts arose with more emphasis than politeness, and Lewisson began to perspire at the prospect of trouble.

"I don't ask any man to take my word," he answered. "The trapeze shall be lowered, and then I invite any, or all, of you to come and examine for yourselves. Down with the trapeze!"

The last order was to his stage assistants, and, as soon as was possible, the order was obeyed. In the mean time there was a wild commotion among the members of the audience, and the opinion was freely expressed that if "thar was grease on ther concern it was a trick ter brace up a snide show."

Consequently, when the critics he invited forward corroborated his assertion that the trapeze was greased, the decision was received with dead silence.

"This will necessitate the changing of our programme slightly," added Lewisson, "though the trapeze act will be given later if we can put it in condition. The show will now go on with the Parzoretti brothers on the horizontal bar."

He made a motion to his assistants, and they disappeared behind the scenes, while he and the gymnast remained to show the audience the flag was still there.

A pause followed. It was painful to the manager, and he waited impatiently for his assistants to reappear. The delay began to grow uncomfortably long, but he strove to appear at his ease. Then the troubled face of one of his men appeared in the distance and he was beckoned to join him.

He did so with rising anger, but the first words literally "knocked him out of time."

"The horizontal-bar is gone!" gasped the man.

"Gone?" echoed Lewisson, in a horrified tone.

"Yes; it can't be found, high nor low. Some one has stolen it!"

Upon the manager's mind flashed a recollection of the warning of trouble which he had received, and he saw clearly, at last, that he had made a fool of himself by neglecting it.

Still, there was a hope that the bar was concealed, not stolen, and he gave his own attention to the matter. Everywhere that it could be he looked, but it had vanished completely. It certainly was not in that part of the building devoted to their use.

He had just concluded his frantic search when one of the Parzorettis came to him with a dismayed face.

"Something must be done, or the people will tear us to pieces. Do you hear that?"

Did he hear it? The question was superfluous. From the body of the house arose a sound as though a menagerie was then let loose, but Lewisson, distinguishing whistles, cat-calls and violent stamping, knew the men of Durango were expressing their disapproval.

For the first time in his life he lost nerve; he dared not face them with fresh excuses. He felt he would not be believed.

"What shall we do?" he gasped.

"Throw something into the gap to break the curse," suggested Parzoretti.

Lewisson caught at the idea. He wheeled on his employees. What one of the attractions would be most likely to succeed then? Ventriloquism, sleight-of-hand, boxing—

Nonsense! the way to appease angry men was not to throw them other men, like a sop to Cerberus; the manager knew that very well.

He turned to the girls. There they stood, troubled, but scarcely frightened, for their lives had deprived them of foolish timidity to a great degree, and he felt that they could sing and dance well if an opportunity was given.

But whom should he take?

At that moment the hall shook with yells which would have been a credit to wild Indians—yells of rage from men who believed themselves swindled.

"Edna Aldene," cried Lewisson, desperately, "will you go out and sing?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STORM BURSTS.

EDNA recoiled at the idea. In his desperation Lewisson had made the question a request, but she was so accustomed to obedience professionally that she did not look upon it otherwise than as a command.

The prospect filled her with dismay. Once before she had seen a variety combination broken up; she had seen the performers who faced the audience subjected to insults of tongue and deed; and she knew enough about the ways of such occasions to fear the men of Durango.

Nevertheless, she did not think of refusing, and though her heart beat with great throbs, she started to obey.

Zeke Wiggins no longer had any doubt as to the success of his scheme. Durango had taken the matter just as he hoped, and in the West or the East, men easily lose their heads when they think they have been humbugged and have paid their money to see a good-for-nothing "show."

He and his gang had only to continue their work, and the Mammoth Combination would go away from the town in a badly demoralized condition.

Every one was talking aloud, many had risen from their seats, cat-calls, shouts and whistles rent the air, and the young rough only awaited the proper moment for suggesting a raid on the property of the combination.

It was at this critical moment that Edna appeared before the audience. She saw a "sea of faces" before her, and it was an angry sea at that. Lewisson, himself, would have quailed before the storm so easily and erroneously raised.

For a moment the girl wavered, and Zeke and his followers burst into loud and derisive cheering. The audience had become a mob.

Edna cast one glance behind her, hoping that Lewisson would, at least, give her an encouraging sign, but he was invisible. It was as though she had been deserted by friends and left alone with her foes.

The emergency served to harden her, and with returning calmness she walked bravely to her place. It seemed as though her voice could not be heard above the din, but she was resolved to sing.

She had had no particular song in her mind when she advanced, and her choice was a mechanical but happy one. Her repertory included a very effective song named "The Men of the Land of Gold," and without further delay she began. She possessed a soprano-voice of great richness, power and melody, and it arose in all its splendor.

As soon as the first words passed her lips all her presence of mind returned, and she sang as a prima donna might have done before a royal family. For a while not a word was distinguishable, but the clear soprano voice was audible even above the uproar, and there were those there who did not fail to recognize its richness.

To this part of the audience it became clear that they were no longer being humbugged. Shouts of "Order!" and "Silence!" took the place of boots, and, gradually, the noise grew less. Zeke Wiggins realized it and booted all the louder, but a grizzled miner bent forward and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Young feller," he said, "dry up or I'll wring yer neck!"

Luckily for the sake of order, Zeke knew the man, and knew, too, that he was one of the hardest fighters in Durango, and it was like

a dash of cold water. The ruffian dared not make a further move, and as the gang became silent a hush fell over the audience.

Then the voice which had before been indistinct sounded clear as a bell, and like the personification of melody. Each word was distinctly enunciated, and the voice arose and fell with marvelous richness.

"I sing of the men of the land of gold!"

Such was the refrain of each stanza, and as the hardy miners caught the spirit of the song they listened with breathless attention. The words were happy and appealed to their love of the craft, while the voice held them spell-bound. Never before had they heard their own story so thrillingly told. All were on their feet, but while they had arisen to deride they remained to admire.

Durango Dave never took his gaze from the singer's face. He remembered the time when, in New York, he had first heard that wonderful voice. It was childish then, and, when he pressed through the crowd to see the singer, he beheld a ragged, forlorn little creature, who seemed to have little bestowed upon her except her voice. It was the latter which drew the crowd and made them wonder, and it was the same thing over in Durango that evening.

The men of the land of gold had never heard anything that so appealed to their pride of craft, and as the singer went on the hush was like that of death in front of the stage.

Edna saw it and redoubled her exertions. Never had she sung as on that night; a hundred brawny miners were subdued by a woman's voice.

When she ceased many deep-drawn breaths swelled to a mighty sigh and the Kennel shook beneath the applause. This time it was not ironical; no famous prima donna ever achieved a more pronounced success. The gold-seekers of Durango were the slaves of the little woman of the stage.

As the singing ceased, Durango Dave aroused and glanced at those he had been watching. Beppo's face bore a look like that of a panther greedy for its prey. Never before had he fully realized what he lost when "little Bianca" escaped his clutches.

From him the youth looked toward the veiled women. They were veiled no longer. Ungovernable excitement, or a mad desire to see the singer clearly, had caused them to uncover their faces, and, as he expected, he saw Miss Darke and Viola Vincent!

Their expression was a marvel. Rage, envy and bitter hatred were there depicted, and a revelation came to Dave.

It was not against the Mammoth Combination, as a whole, that their spite was directed, but against Edna; it was to injure her they had planned to wreck the outfit.

It was only a suspicion, but the shrewd young man would have wagered a good deal on his surmise. For a person of nineteen years, he had a faculty of seeing a good distance into a mystery.

Edna bowed and would have retired, but the audience would not have it so.

"Again! again!"

The shout arose like a mighty wave, and, conscious that victory was in her grasp, she promptly obeyed. Without any relaxation of effort she began again at the first stanza, and once more that deep hush fell over the gold-seeker listeners.

The happiest man in the Kennel was G. B. L. Lewisson. He saw victory wrested from the jaws of defeat; he saw his combination saved by one little woman whom he clearly saw he had previously underrated; and he mentally asserted that his purse should be emptied to the last dollar to reward her.

Zeke Wiggins, on the contrary, was almost choking with rage. As well as his scheme had begun it amounted to nothing, and he could hope for nothing from Miss Darke, if it fell flat after that point; but the young rough dared not make another hostile move.

Edna had captured Durango, and the miners found the captive chains so pleasant that they would stand by her to the end.

Dorothy Darke realized this as well as Zeke did, and her half century of life proved unavailing against the furious rage that assailed her. Her face had a blue, pinched look, and with her gaze riveted on the singer in a stony stare, she thrust her hand into her pocket.

It touched a revolver and she drew the weapon. Every one, not excepting Viola Vincent, was too absorbed to notice her, and she raised it and aimed unchecked.

A moment's delay—a sharp report—and then Edna staggered back and fell to the floor.

CHAPTER IX.

DURANGO SHOWS ITS TEETH.

THE song was checked in its melodious flow, but the men of the land of gold were not stupid enough to wonder at the cause. The voice of a revolver was no new thing there, and the fact that "the modern Jenny Lind" had fallen proved that there had been a deliberate, probably successful, attempt at assassination.

Who had done the foul deed?

Durango asked the question amid the greatest excitement, and from the bronzed miners went up a shout of anger which shook the Kennel. From the moment that song fell upon their ears the singer was theirs—theirs to admire, to applaud, to bouquet, perhaps; certainly, to be regarded as the queen of the stage.

From the first Durango Dave suspected the guilty party, and he fought his way through the crowd to accuse and seize her.

He arrived too late. Miss Darke was already in the hands of the miners who had sat nearest her, and the revolver, with fresh smoke on the muzzle, was in their possession. He saw that their anger was at a white heat, and only the sex of the assassin saved her from speedy retribution.

Dave looked for Viola Vincent, but she was invisible; it was afterward found she had slipped away as soon as the deed was done, and those who searched for her that night failed to find her.

Miss Darke had fought like a wildcat for awhile, but when she saw the folly of it, she relapsed into sullen silence.

In the meanwhile, Lewisson had rushed upon the stage and knelt beside Edna. She was rising to her elbow, but he saw a red pool gathering at her side and feared the worst.

"Great Heavens!" he cried, "what have I done? You are shot—bleeding—speak and tell me it is not dangerous!"

"I don't know," she answered, faintly. "My arm—"

"She is fainting!" gasped the manager. "Quick, there; bring water, camphor, brandy—What is needed?"

No one was calm enough to answer, and with a sigh the girl closed her eyes and lay a dead weight in his arms.

He thought she was dead, in reality, and the bitterest regret of his life came to him. Why had he put her forward to face the roaring lions he, himself, dared not face?

Jessie Jordan was the first to recover her self-possession, and, ordering the curtain lowered, she relieved Lewisson of his bleeding burden and gave directions to the other girls in a sharp, clear voice none would have recognized as her own.

The curtain went down, but very little headway had been made further than that when two men brushed it aside and strode toward the dismayed group.

"I am a physician," said the foremost. "Stand aside, and I will do what can be done."

The second turned on Lewisson like a tiger, and he recognized Durango Dave.

"Scoundrel!" cried the youth, hotly, "what do you think of your work?"

The manager tried to speak, but no sound passed his lips.

"Look yonder and behold your work!" the young champion continued, pointing to Edna. "She is dead and her blood is on your head!"

"By my life, I did not mean it—"

"Mean it! It was your stubbornness that did it all. I warned you fairly, and you chose to regard me as a liar and take no precaution for safety. Sir, you are a scoundrel and a coward! When you saw that there was trouble, as I warned you there would be, what did you do? Did you face the mob yourself? No, you put forward a girl, a girl, to face the storm you dared not meet! And this is the result. Oh! you poltroon!"

The speaker towered aloft in his indignation like a pitiless judge, and the manager cowered before him. He was not frightened, but he felt that the accusation was just, and he would gladly have disappeared forever from the view of those who knew him.

"I made an unhappy mistake," he stammered.

"Unhappy mistake! It was criminal folly, sir. You were warned, but you would not listen. Had your whole combination gone to pieces—"

"I wish to Heaven it had, rather than that one hair of the girl's innocent head had been injured!" he cried, passionately.

Durango Dave hesitated. He saw that the manager was sincerely repentant, and though that made small recompense for what his lack of

faith had done, angry accusation would certainly do no more.

It was the physician who broke the brief silence.

"Have no fear," he announced. "The young lady has received only a flesh-wound, and I pledge my professional word she shall soon be well again. She swooned more from nervous excitement than anything else, and we have only to take good care of her and all will be well."

Every face on the stage brightened, but from in front of it arose a murmur which told that the people demanded news.

"Go to the front and tell them what I have said, Dave," added the doctor.

The direction was obeyed, and when the announcement was made, the Kennel once more shook with cheers. Every honest miner rejoiced at the news. Zeke Wiggins and his gang were not there to hear it; alarmed for their personal safety, they had seized the first chance to slip away.

Miss Darke, however, was a fast prisoner, and there was little fear that she would escape. The miners felt very bitterly toward her, and many an honest fellow expressed a regret that she was not a man. Had she been, she would have fared hardly; as it was, her captors could only show their teeth.

She maintained a sort of sullen calmness, and refused to answer any questions. Even when Dave came forward and told how she had tried to hire him to do her work, she answered nothing.

It was unanimously decided that she must be consigned to close confinement. What they would do with her in the end no one seemed to know, but some sort of punishment must be devised.

Matters gradually assumed a quieter aspect. Edna had recovered from her swoon and in a condition which cheered the hearts of all her friends and she was taken to the hotel and deluged with attention.

Of course, the entertainment was at an end for that evening, and the crowd and performers dispersed, one after another, until the Kennel hall was deserted by all save those set to guard the property.

Lewisson did not intend to have further damage done.

Durango Dave left the place with the fixed resolution to find Viola Vincent, who he believed as worthy of punishment as her aunt. Men had been to the house and failed to find her, but Dave believed she was hiding somewhere in the village.

As he left the Kennel he saw Solo Sam, and the big man at once accosted him.

"Hol' on, a bit. I hev a tune ter play, pard, an' ef you ain't no previous 'gagement, I'd like you ter jine me in ther chorus."

"I've got a chorus of my own to attend to just now," Dave answered.

"Can't we jine forces?"

The champion hesitated, but, remembering that Sam had helped him with a will when he had trouble with Beppo in the Kennel saloon, he replied:

"I'll hear your business, and see."

"Wal, yer see I was out on ther mount'n ter-day, an' when wanderin' 'long nigh ther trail, I came onto a defunct man layin' by ther side o' a crick."

"A dead man?" interrupted Dave.

"No, he wa'n't dead; he was only defunct. So, when I see'd his condition, I applied water ambiguously an' soon brought him ter his insens. He had a bullet wovnd on his head, an' a bad one at that, an' he was out o' his mind, an' I couldn't git him ter sing a straight song nobow. He kept talkin' about Durango, his wife an' darter, an', every two or three minutes, he would say: 'Ther Italian will guide me straight'."

"Beppo?"

"I reckon it must hev been old Maccaroni, fur he's ther only Italian in Durango just now."

"Well, what of your patient?"

"Twa'n't wal, by a long ways, fur he didn't come outer his moral sensibility fur a cent. I see'd he couldn't be moved ter Durango, so I kerried him to a cave nigh at hand, which I opine I am ther only explorer ov, an' put him ter bed. Arter that I left him an' come hyar fur medicine. Afore I left, suthin' like sense come ter him, an' he begged ov me not ter tell any one he was thar."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Fur one thing, git ther medicine I carry ter him. His wound ain't serious, an' I kin bring him 'round all right, ef he's destined ter sing ther ditty through. Fur another thing, I mean ter see Bepper an' ask him what he knows about ther case."

Dave frowned thoughtfully.

"You say that man has a bullet wound?"

"I rather opine he have."

"Very likely Beppo gave it to him. If, as his rambling talk indicates, he hired the rascal to guide him to Durango, Beppo would not have hesitated to kill him if he saw a chance to make a dollar."

"Jest my idee. Bepper seems ter be an ole acquaintance o' yourn. What d'ye know about him?"

"I saw him first in New York, five or six years ago. He was on the Bowery, one evening, playing a hand-organ, and accompanied by a girl who played a tambourine. He became angry and struck her. I was a boy at the time, but my blood boiled at the sight, and, before I hardly knew what I was doing, I struck him to the ground. I doubt if Beppo knows me now, but the girl I interfered to protect was the same who sung at the Kennel to-night."

"I knew Bepper was a bad one, or, as he would call it, 'a bad-a-man-a from ther ground-a up-a.' Durn his brogue, why does he talk so? I can't see no sorter diffikilty in speakin' ther English language with purity an' k'reckness."

After some talk between the two it was decided that they should first search for Viola Vincent, and then interview the Italian. The programme settled, they proceeded to carry it out, but the first part was a failure—they could not find the missing girl anywhere.

"Never mind," said Dave, philosophically. "Such a tender plant as she is can't keep *sub rosa* a great while, and I'll see that she walks up to the bar and takes her dose of justice. Now for Beppo!"

It was not hard to find the Italian, for he had returned to the Kennel saloon as soon as matters became quiet, and they walked in and toward him. His pard, Mike, was not present, and there was a slight look of uneasiness on his face as he saw the two men. He had seen a sample of what they could do when they went about it in earnest, and he would greatly have preferred to see them no more.

Still, he was no coward, and he kept his place, a defiant look on his dark face.

"Hullo, Bepper, old stock, how be you?" Solo Sam genially asked.

"Me feel-a well," the Italian cautiously answered.

"That's a song ev'ry one can't sing, but it's all right ez fur ez it goes. By ther way, whar's ther old man you sot out ter guide ter Durango t'other day?"

Beppo had believed himself prepared for the question, and had done all that was possible to bear it indifferently if it ever came, but Sam had spoken so suddenly that he could not avoid a guilty start.

"Me guide no old man-a," he managed, however, to assert in a positive manner.

"Bepper, I hate to sing so ha'shly," was the quiet reply; "but you are a durned liar!"

CHAPTER X.

SOLO SAM AND DAVE PLAY A DUET.

BEPPU had not lived half a lifetime as a bravo for nothing, and after the first shock of surprise, he was as cool and audacious as ever. He knew Solo Sam referred to the man he and Mike had put out of the way on the mountain trail, but he did not suspect the swift waters had given up their victim, and he decided that it must have come to Sam's ears that he had left the neighboring town with Comstock.

Certainly, he could know no more than that.

"You take care!" he said, showing his white teeth viciously at the last remark. "Me never seek a quarrel, but-a if you press me too hard, I make bad-a enemy."

"I don't keer an eighth-note whether you are bad, 'bada,' or baddest," Sam returned. "This crowd don't skeer fur a cent, anyhow. What we want is ther plain, unvarnished truth, right in ther key o' C, natural. Give it to us, without a slur."

"Me know-a nothing."

"You know too mighty much ter be an honest man, you riptyle. You took out ther old man—that's flat; now, then, *who shot him?*"

"Who shot-a who?" Beppo replied, slowly.

"Oh! you pesky snake! why don't you sing ther U S language? Be you deaf or purblind? You know what I mean; an' now I say, who shot ther ole man?"

"Me know-a not what you talk about. Me guide no one, and me not understand-a. When you speak-a of an old man, you go beyond what I can say-a."

"Take car', Bepper, fur one c' these days I'll bring him hyar. Look out fur that!"

The Italian rolled his eyes, and looked from

Sam to Dave, and then back again. He began to have grave fears that Comstock had not perished in the mountain stream, after all.

"I know-a nothing; but if you have any such man as you talk-a about, you take me to him-a, and we will see if I know-a him."

"You're too cunnin' fur this world, Bepper, but it won't work. Ef you could have all yer wanted, ye'd be askin' fur ther 'arth. No, no; it won't wash. But if you know anytbing about ther ole man's wife, jest you say so. It won't do you any harm."

"Bah! I tell you I know-a nothin'—"

"Which makes jest a dozen times you've used ther tarm. Wal, you mis'ble critter, it shall go ez you say it, but ef you don't come ter time, I'll drop on ye when I git a chance!"

"What you talk-a about? Your words all puzzle to me. You talk-a plain, me know what you mean. What old man you speak-a about?"

"Wal, fur dogged, mule-headed know-nothingism you take the cake, Bepper; but ez I kin easily foller ther rambles of o' yer mind, I don't know that I'm surprised at it. Still, don't ye think ye kin fool this crowd. We ain't that kind. All I've got ter say is, that ef you can't see ther hole in ther grindstone now, we'll make ye see it later. Havin' said this, I've said enough, an' we'll leave ye ter yer dreams. So 'long!"

By this time Sam was on his feet, and he went out, followed by Durango Dave.

Beppo looked after them with an evil scowl on his dark face.

"They bad-a men; they make trouble for-a me!" he muttered, playing with the handle of his knife. "How much-a they know? Have they found the body of the old man-a? Life of me, I did not think the stream would give up its dead-a. Ah! Beppo, you better look a out a little. These men mean harm. Me get Bianca and go away from-a Durango!"

In the mean while, Dave and Sam had gone out together, and as the hour was not so very late, they wandered away from the village.

It was Dave's theory that Viola Vincent was hiding in the neighboring gulches, and they might happen upon her.

"It is a foregone conclusion that Beppo knows more about the old man than he confessed," Dave averred.

"Yas, an' a five-gone conclusion, too. Bepper is about as bad as they make 'em, I reckon. Ez I figger it, he started ter guide ther ole man hyar, an' then tried ter throw him cold on ther trail."

"Isn't it injudicious to leave him alone?"

"Leave who alone?"

"The old man."

"Did I say he war alone?"

"I understood you so."

"Mebbe I did, but I don't mind sayin' in secrecy that I hev a pard thar who is takin' car' o' him. Now an' then I sing a duet instead o' a solo, but it wouldn't do ter hev it ginerally knowed."

Sam's manner indicated that he did not wish to enlarge on the subject, and the youth let it drop.

By that time they had reached the ridge back of the town. They paused and looked back. Durango was silent, so far as they could tell, but lights were still visible from some houses. Solo Sam sat down on a rock, Dave followed his example, and a pause ensued.

They were sitting thus, when the sound of voices caused them to look down the gulch. Neither spoke, but as the voices became nearer, they arose and secured a position where they could see and, themselves, remain unseen.

As the unknown men came nearer, one voice, at least, betrayed its owner to Dave, and he leaned over and touched Solo Sam.

"Zeke Wiggins!" he whispered.

"Aba! Wal, that's int'restin', an' we'll proceed ter see what ther critter is goin' ter do."

"I suspect he knows where Viola is. We will dog him."

With Wiggins were two of his men, but though they passed within a few yards, they had ceased conversation, and in no way betrayed what was taking them abroad.

The watchers quietly arose and followed.

At the end of fifty yards, however, the trio paused.

"We'll make way with it in ther shake o' a mule's hoof," observed Zeke. "Pull it out, Turpentine Tom, an' ef them galoots finds anytbing ter convict us, I'm a liar."

"You're a liar, anyhow," Sam muttered, sotto voce.

Turpentine Tom went down on his knees and dragged something out of a niche in the rocks.

"Hyar she is," he said. "Now, what'll we do with it?"

"What'd I take ther hatchet fur?" growled Zeke. "We will chop it in pieces an' burn ther durned thing. Hand it hyar!"

Dave touched Sam's arm.

"It is the horizontal-bar!"

"Tis, eh? So it's their game ter destroy it?"

"Exactly, and so prevent the riot being fastened upon them. Well, it's my game to prevent it. Shall I count on you, or play a lone hand?"

"Make it a duet, boyee; make it a duet. You strike ther pitch an' I'll come in on ther upbeat."

Plainly, Solo Sam was eager for the fray.

Zeke Wiggins had just raised his hatchet to demolish the bar when a voice sounded sharply from the background.

"Hands up!"

The young ruffians started abruptly and faced about. There stood Durango Dave and his pard, and their revolvers were held at a bead which covered them in an ominous way.

"We've got a word to say here," Durango's champion coolly added, "and it may be boiled down to this: That horizontal-bar is wanted in the village, not for firewood. We're going to take it there. If you kick, bear in mind that bullets are trumps, and that we hold the drop!"

A mad oath fell from Zeke's lips.

"It's death fur you ter b'ile in hyar!" he cried.

"Oh! is it? Well, there's a difference of opinion. There won't be any slaying if you are discreet, and I advise you to bottle up your wrath and save your skin."

"Keep your advice ter yerself."

"Thank you for nothing. All I want is the bar, and if you won't think me too brash, I may add that I'm going to have it, whether you're willing or not."

"Then you'll take it over my dead body."

"Just as you say, but I'm going to have it."

"By ther Eternal, you sha'n't! I want it myself."

"You're modest enough to ask for the earth. Here, you, Turpentine Thomas, stop it!"

Zeke's right bower had been working his hand along to his belt, trusting that, in the darkness, the movement would remain unseen, but he had underrated the champion's sharpness.

"I ain't doin' nothin'!" he growled.

"You're tempting fate, my gay galoot, and if you do it again, you're liable to collide with a lump o' lead. Now, gents, once more reminding you that we hold the drop, I'll trouble you to move back about twenty feet and give us that bar."

"Never!" said Zeke.

"You mule-headed heathen!" cried Solo Sam, "hear my anthem roll. Ef you don't git off ther pedal, you'll git knocked out o' time an' tune!"

Durango Dave waited no longer. He saw that the time for action had come. Zeke and his followers were playing a bluff game, and the longer they could keep it up, the better would be their chances. An interruption might occur in their favor, or they might win the lead and get in a snap-shot. Consequently, it was well to carry the war into their camp.

"No more talk!" he said, tersely. "Advance, Sam! We're going to have that bar!"

He strode forward as he spoke, and Turpentine Tom and Jim Forbes fell back at once. Zeke was not cowed, but he was not a fool, and he sullenly followed them.

"I am glad to see you have so much sense," added Dave, coolly. "This bar is wanted in Durango, and, I need scarcely say, you will not be after this. Still, it is more than possible that your share will be forgiven if you are willing to make a clean breast of it, and acknowledge that Dorothy Darke hired you to do the job."

"Go ter blazes!" roared Wiggins.

"Haven't time, but I'll remember your kindness all the same. Perhaps I can repay it some time."

He picked up the bar, which had not been injured since it was stolen, and each one present knew that when it was restored to Lewissan it would be a cold day for Zeke Wiggins and his followers.

The thought filled Zeke with fresh rage, and he resolved to risk all in a bold attempt. Drawing his knife with a jerk, he dashed on Durango Dave like a tiger.

CHAPTER XL ZEKE'S NEW ALLY.

DURANGO DAVE was not taken by surprise. He knew the young rough to be a desperate and hot-headed fellow, and all the while he had ex-

pected him to draw his revolver and try his luck in that way; but when Zeke took a different tack, he was ready for him at the home stretch.

He simply dropped the end of the bar to a level with Zeke's stomach, and a moment later there was a collision and something fell. The rough had been unable to stop in his frantic rush, and as the pole took him amidships, he went over like a ten-pin and lay where he fell.

Turpentine Tom and Jim Forbes had been waiting their leader's word, and they promptly backed him up by rushing forward themselves, bent on mischief.

Dave and Sam had them at their mercy, had they seen fit to use their revolvers, but neither wished to shed blood, and as a result they met them for a grapple.

It was catch-as-catch-can, and Solo Sam, with a good-humored grin on his broad face, seized the wrists of Jim Forbes, swung him around like a top, and then laid him across his knee.

"What you need is corporeal chastisement," he observed. "I reckon ef yer dad had played Yankee Doodle on yer more when you was a kid, you wouldn't be so out o' time and tune now."

Forbes struggled furiously, but though he was a muscular young fellow, he was in the hands of a man twice as strong as he, and Sam proceeded to carry out his threat, looking around, now and then, to see how his partner was progressing.

Turpentine Tom was not so easily disposed of by Dave. They were well-matched in years, as well as in strength, and for a while the result seemed doubtful, since Tom devoted nearly all his attention to avoiding the wrestling points where he knew the champion was so skillful; but the end had to come, sooner or later, and he was laid on his back with a resounding thump.

"Good boy!" commented Solo Sam. "That war a pooty little flop, an' I see they're all down now."

He glanced at Zeke Wiggins, whose breath had been knocked out of him by the bar.

"What shall we do with them?" Dave asked.

"Plant 'em!" said Sam, with a grin.

"Don't ye try it!" panted Forbes.

"Oh! go away, ye cantankerous catamount. You're ez vicious ez a buckin' mule."

"I'll hev yer life fur this!" hissed Jim, whose pride had received a shock he could never forget.

In his opinion, only blood could wash away the disgrace of his novel panishment.

"All right!" Sam genially answered. "Any time you set up a butcher-shop, call around an' see me. I'm 'most always ter hum, an' we'll sing a war-song in ther key o' G."

"I propose that we take these two fellows to the village, and then send men out for Wiggins," said Dave.

"Jest ez you say; 'tain't my festival, nohow. You take the bar, an' I'll take ther boys. Hand over yer lamb, with ther care due sech a tender plant, an' I'll take ez good car' o' them ez their mummies could do."

Words cannot describe the fury which raged in the young roughs' breasts. Had Sam taken a week for thought, he could not have adopted another manner so calculated to cut them to the quick; he was treating them as mere children, and their blood fairly boiled at the idea.

For a moment Dave hesitated about giving him both of the pair, but Sam's easy confidence prevented argument and they were handed over, after being relieved of their weapons.

He took each one by the collar, the good-humored grin on his face as before.

"Forward, light infant-ry!" he demanded.

"Let ther bugle sound, an' we'll go inter Durango with flags a-flyin'!"

Turpentine Tom growled a curse, but it was a waste of breath, and they were marched off in triumph. Dave bent over Wiggins for a moment and then, satisfied that he was still insensible, he followed, bearing the horizontal-bar in one hand and a revolver in the other.

Zeke was left alone on the scene of conflict, but the sounds of the retreating party had not long ceased to be audible when a new actor appeared on the ground.

From out a dark niche came a female form, and with quick steps she hastened to the unconscious youth's form. A brief examination convinced her he was, indeed, unconscious, and she took his hat, went to a spring of water near at hand, filled it and, returning, began to bathe his head.

Her efforts, or the progress of Nature, soon had an effect on the fellow, and he opened his

eyes and looked around. There was a severe pain in the region of his stomach and a profane exclamation trembled on his lips, but it was forgotten as he saw the woman.

"You hyar, Viola?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I'm here."

It was clear from the way in which she spoke that the young lady was not in an amiable mood.

"Great Cæsar, I didn't think fur ter see it. You—you out in ther hills at sech an hour?"

"Where should I be?" the girl bitterly asked.

"I am an outcast from Durango, and I've got to keep out of sight of those fiends who have arrested my aunt."

Zeke forgot all about his pains and briskly arose.

"I'll help yer fur ter do it, too!" he declared.

"I'll help ye ter keep outer ther sight; I'll help ye ter get ther best on 'em in a game o' wits. Be you goin' ter be hunted an' hounded by them trash?—an' you a purty girl! Not ef I knows ther ins an' outs o' ther game, an' I opine I do."

"And help to rescue my aunt?"

"I'll hev her out or burn Durango down."

"There's my hand, Zeke Wiggins!"

The girl thrust forward a white, shapely member, and the young rough promptly imprisoned it. He felt a thrill at having gone so far with a delicate, beautiful girl, and had no means of knowing that, while she was willing to promise him a good deal to bind him to her service, she was, really, filled with disgust and loathing.

"We'll work tergether," he continued.

"Yes."

"But what's to be my reward?"

"What do you think right?"

He hesitated, and, despite his bull-dog nature, was somewhat afraid to speak.

"I'm a single man," he finally said, "but ef I could hev you fur a wife, I'd leap at ther chance like a mountain sheep, you bet!"

"Win me, and I am yours."

"How shall I do it?"

"Release Miss Darke, break up the show, kill Durango Dave and Edna Aldene, and I will be your wife!"

Zeke did not stop to meditate on the size of the task laid out for him; to win Viola Vincent he would have promised anything and his reply was prompt.

"Done!" he exclaimed.

He regarded it as the greatest triumph of his life, and Viola felt no great emotion either way. She had no idea of keeping her promise, and regarded him as no better than the dust under her feet, but she did not scruple to promise fairly in order to gain his aid.

"One thing more," he said, after a pause.

"What is that?"

"Now we're leagued tergether, hadn't I better know somethin' about ther grudge you have ag'in' ther show? It'll help meter work fur you."

"That is my aunt's secret, not mine," Viola readily answered, "and, of course, I am not at liberty to tell it without her consent; but I have no doubt but she will readily confide in you when she's released and we tell her the arrangements we have made."

Zeke was disappointed at the reply, but he was too wise to press the matter then.

"I'll hev her outer jail in a jiffy," he announced, "an' I'll make Durango howl for its freshness. I'm Zeke Wiggins, an' I'm a condensed cyclone from whar they make 'em. But I hed some pards hyar, a while ago. Whar be they?"

Viola had witnessed the whole of the late struggle, and she briefly related how Turpentine Tom and Jim Forbes had come to grief.

Zeke was a madman then, but he kept down his wrath and confined it to telling what he would do to secure revenge for this fresh "indignity" to his friends.

He was still airing his voice when another speaker put in his contribution.

"Hallo, boyees, we're jest in the nick o' time. Hyar's ther young kid on his feet, an' hyar's ther gal, too. We're in luck!"

Viola and Zeke wheeled and saw four men. They were those sent to bring in Zeke, and the latter knew from the first it was to be war to the knife. He recognized them, and knew they were never friends of his. Just at present, they were his bitter enemies.

His hand dropped to his belt for his revolvers, but he made the discovery that they were not there, and it became clear that they had been taken away by Durango Dave or Solo Sam.

"I won't surrender!" he grated through his

teeth. "I'll fool 'em an' make 'em think I've lost my 'sand,' but I'll escape or kill them all! Watch your chance, and when it comes, slip away."

It was an unnecessary direction. Viola now feared the men of Durango as though they were so many wolves, and she did not need any advice on that point. When once the chance was given, she would get away with all possible speed.

"You've got inter a purty scrape now, Zeke Wiggins," said one of the new-comers. "I tole you, a year ago, you'd come ter some bad end."

"Don't you preach!" Zeke retorted. "I'm goin' back ter ther village, ah' I'll make them as accuses me o' evil-doin' smell fire. I'm inner-cent, an' I'll prove it, an' then let them all look out. That's my platform."

The young rough was standing quietly, as though he had no idea of resisting, but every nerve was strained for the great effort he intended to make.

The men advanced, unsuspecting that he would try to fight four of them, and then he moved. Leaping forward he hurled his whole weight against the foremost man, directing the effort so that, as he fell, he struck against a second, and both went down together.

Then Zeke leaped at the others like a tiger. He was a hard and scientific fighter at all times, and such a man, with the odds of a surprise in his favor, can do a good deal of damage. Two quick blows he struck, and while the first knocked down a man, the second caused the intended victim to move so suddenly to avoid it that he stumbled and fell.

Zeke looked around for Viola. He had not miscalculated on her nerve: she was already in retreat, and he dashed after her. He was none too soon.

One of the fallen men was already on his feet. "Halt, you young bound!" he cried, angrily. "Halt, or I fire!"

The fugitive answered with a derisive laugh but did not pause. Better the risk of a shot in the dark than captivity.

Crack! crack!

Twice the man's revolver spoke, but the bullets whistled wide of their mark and Zeke shouted tauntingly.

The whole of the men were soon on their feet, and pursuit was made, but Zeke knew the hills too well to be caught in so dark a night. He was seen no more, nor was Viola, and the quartette went back to Durango empty-handed.

CHAPTER XII.

EDNA SEES A FAMILIAR FACE.

ANOTHER day dawned on Durango. There had been no visible change in the appearance of the place, but men awoke with food for thought which had not been theirs the previous day. They had a prisoner in jail, in the person of Miss Darke, and there was a universal desire to know the condition of the "modern Jenny Lind."

When Durango took a fancy to a person, they wanted it distinctly understood that they "backed her for all they were worth."

They were agreeably surprised when they learned that she was not only out of danger but able to be out of her room. The wound she had received was merely one of the flesh, and she announced her intention of going on the stage again that evening, if the Mammoth Combination appeared at the Kennel.

Durango Dave called on Lewisson at an early hour, and was received by the latter in a manner which indicated that he wished to atone for the past; and as the youth was not one to bear ill-will where no harm was meant, they were soon on good terms.

"I hear Miss Aldene is feeling comfortably well," observed the young champion.

"So she is. She has directed me to say she will go on the stage again to night."

"She had better not, until Zeke Wiggins and the Vincent girl are roped in."

"We shall take precautions not to admit them to the theater, and all Durango wants to hear Edna sing again."

"Well, it's none of my affair. What I want to speak about is that tiger-cat in jail—Miss Darke."

Lewisson frowned.

"What about her?"

"I think Miss Aldene had better see her. It has become clear that the woman's hatred is against Edna, not your outfit as a whole, and as there must be a cause for her hatred, why wouldn't it be a good idea for Edna to visit her and see if she recognizes her?"

"Why, of course it would. I didn't think of that before. I know Edna is able and will agree, and you and I will escort her there. I'll go to her with the suggestion at once."

He went, but soon returned to say that Edna wished to see the young man. Dave was not reluctant, and he was soon in the presence of the girl. She was a trifle pale, and her arm was still in a sling, but her eyes and face retained their old brightness, and she welcomed Dave cordially.

An interview of an hour's duration followed, but it had been agreed to visit Miss Darke in prison, and the three went out together. The would-be murderess had been disarmed, and there was no danger that she would do further mischief.

She had been very quiet since her incarceration, showing neither temper nor interest, and refusing to answer all questions, and they found her sitting in a chair, looking fixedly at the floor.

Edna started, and when Dave looked at her he knew she had seen no strange face, but her expression was one of wonder more than anything else. The men waited quietly, but the girl did not speak, nor did the prisoner raise her gaze.

"Miss Darke," said Dave at last, "you have a visitor."

The woman raised her eyes and looked at them, but her set face betrayed no more emotion than that of a statue. She did not speak.

"Miss Edna Aldene is here," he curtly added. "I dare say you recognize her."

Still there was no answer.

"Your policy of silence is a mistaken one," he impatiently continued. "You have attempted a monstrous crime, and all Durango is now against you; but the way to secure mercy is to deserve it. Repent and confess, and we will do what we can for you."

The cold, gray eyes were turned full upon him.

"Advice from such a mature person as yourself must necessarily be valuable," she sarcastically observed.

Durango's champion laughed lightly.

"I know I'm only nineteen," he confessed, "but wisdom is not always the fruit of many years—witness your own case. What have you to say to Miss Aldene?"

"Nothing."

"You see she recognizes you."

"It is of no consequence whether she does or not."

"Take care, madame; it will not be to your advantage to anger Durango further."

"I don't care that for Durango!" and she made a scornful gesture.

"Perhaps you think Durango is equally indifferent, but her foible is that she don't care a picayune whether you like her way or not. You have committed a crime, and it will be severely punished unless you gain mercy by a confession."

A sneer curled the woman's lips, but she did not answer. Dave motioned to Edna, and they left the cell together, leaving Lewisson with the prisoner.

"You recognized her, I see," said the champion, abruptly. "What do you know of her?"

"Very little, and that much only serves to increase the mystery. I have seen her twice in my life—I think that is all. First, it was in New York, when I was with Beppo. He had a fight with someone, and was locked up a whole day. While he was away this woman called at the house. She knew my name and asked to see me, but I did not know her. She stayed, perhaps, fifteen minutes, but all her conversation was addressed to Mrs. Grimes, the keeper of the house. She did not speak to me, but she looked at me in a wild, fierce way which frightened me terribly. She asked questions about me, and I remember she looked pleased when she heard that we were poor, and that Beppo ill-treated me. She went away without having explained why she came. Mrs. Grimes asked if I had ever seen her before, and when I said I had not, she declared the woman was either mad or my deadly enemy."

"Last night proved which was the case," tersely commented Dave. "Well, what was the second time?"

"I did not see her for years," resumed Edna, "but I always remembered her. Less than a year ago I was in St. Louis, singing at one of the theaters. When I went on the stage one night, I glanced over the audience, from force of habit, but with indifference, until my gaze reached one of the private boxes. There it became fixed. There was but one occupant, and she was a woman with a veil closely drawn, but the moment I saw her I knew her."

"It was Miss Darke?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"For one thing, I remained speechless when I should have been singing, and there was a break in the music. That night was my least successful one on the stage, for through it all that woman sat and glared at me. Not for a moment did she turn her head. I felt so uneasy that I lost nearly all my points, and the stage manager looked black with anger when I appeared to him."

"Was that all?"

"Yes. No; a note was brought to me by an usher that night, and though its author was never known to me, I suspected it came from the woman. It was very brief, as well as mystic. 'Tiger-cat and disgraceful girl! triumph while you can, but your career is short.' Such was the message."

"Have you it now?" quickly asked Dave.

"No. I burned it at once."

He looked disappointed.

"Stay! should you recognize the writing again?"

"I think I should."

He drew from his pocket the note with which Miss Darke had summoned him to her house the night we introduced the young champion to the reader, and Edna looked at it long and earnestly.

"I believe it is the same, though there is this difference: the other was in a coarser, more irregular hand, as though written hastily."

"I think we are safe enough in believing she wrote them both. But what can be the secret of her hatred for you?"

"That I don't know."

"It seems that it extends back to your childhood, so it cannot be anything you have done to her. Conclusion, it must be because you are who you are."

"If she knows who I am, she knows better than I do. My whole life previous to the time when I was with Beppo is a mystery."

Durango Dave did not answer at once, but he was trying to think of some way to make Miss Darke speak plainly.

"But what of Viola Vincent?" he finally said. "She is no older than you. Why does she hate you?"

Edna shook her head.

"It's all a mystery."

"Well, I'm going to find it out. I rather like to tackle tangled-up cases, and I'm going for this, red-hot. Now, let's go back to Miss Darke."

They re-entered the cell. They found the prisoner sitting as when they first saw her. Lewisson was idly humming the refrain of an old song.

Miss Darke looked up quickly as the young people entered, and her keen gaze flashed from one face to the other and then back.

"Well, have you got at the mystery?" she sarcastically asked.

"Not exactly, but we're going to, if Durango don't drop off its pivot," Dave coolly answered.

"We have decided to give you a fair chance, Miss Darke, to save your precious head. Make a frank confession, and Miss Aldene will not appear against you."

"Ha! ha! that shows your cause is weak. Of course it is weak, and it will always remain so. I shall not confess, my babes in the wood, and don't you think I will. You are at liberty to do your worst; I can stand it!"

"Do you know the temper of a border town when its blood is up?"

"I suppose that is a vague way of speaking about Judge Lynch. So be it; I do not fear him."

The words were not spoken with an air of bravado, but with a cold firmness which spoke well for the woman's nerves.

"Don't be too brazen!" broke in Lewisson, hotly. "I'll make an example of you, if it takes every dollar I have in the world."

"I await your pleasure, prince of managers."

"Let us go!" said Edna, shivering. "I do not want to remain longer."

It was good advice, and they left the prisoner to herself and her meditations.

CHAPTER XIII.

BEPPU FOLLOWS A TRAIL.

THE day brought forth nothing new. The search made for Zeke Wiggins and Viola Vincent proved unavailing; Beppo, too, kept out of sight; and when Turpentine Tom and Jim Forbes had confessed all they knew, it was clear they did not know the motive which had led to the attack on "the modern Jenny Lind."

Nearly every one was calling for prompt judgment on the prisoner, but it was agreed that it

would be well to capture Zeke and Viola before proceeding further, and try the whole batch of conspirators at once.

But, despite all their efforts, the pair were not found that day. Durango Dave—who had taken a long bound in the good-will of the citizens—and Solo Sam were among those who searched, but as darkness drew near, the latter decided that he had better attend to his own affairs.

Accordingly, he had supper at the More Wet Hotel and then left the town. Darkness had fallen, and he lost no time, but strode away across the mountain.

He little suspected that he was followed, almost from the first, but a man fell in behind him and followed with the skill and persistency of an Indian.

"Me see a where you go," the pursuer muttered. "If you have found a old man Comstock, me want-a know it. Maybe so he is still-a alive, and the world is not big-a enough for us both. Life of me, can-a he have escaped Mike's bullet? We shall see!"

That he intended to see was clear, for he followed tirelessly as Solo Sam led on over the mountain. What troubled Beppo more than anything else was the fact that their course was taking them toward the mountain trail, where Comstock had received the wound he supposed to be fatal at the time.

"If I find-a them, me kill-a Comstock this time sure, and Solo Sam shall die with him. My safety depends on it, and I am sure the women who have so stirred up-a this town will not be sorry. Ah! there is money ahead for you, Beppo, if you play-a your cards well-a!"

When Sam paused it was beside the slope of a ravine, and from the fact that he had gone to one point unhesitatingly, it was plain he knew what he was about.

Beppo watched while there was a brief delay, and then the tall man disappeared from view.

"A cave!" thought the Italian. "Good! I will see what-a is in it."

He crept up and found there was indeed a small aperture. He heard a faint sound of voices and, putting out his hand, touched a quantity of pine branches. He put them a little aside and saw a light; he looked further and saw a cave with two men for occupants. One was Solo Sam; the second was a negro of the blackest hue.

The latter seemed to have just joined Sam, after securing the entrance.

"Wal, Nimrod, how's ther patient?" Sam asked.

"Poity much ther same, Massa Sam."

"Ain't got his equilibrioss yet, has he?"

"His which-hoss, sah?"

"His mental horizontal—his senses."

"Oh! yes, he's done got plenty ob dem, but dey ain't de right kind. Ter put it in United States, Massa Sam, he is clean gone in his upper story."

"I war in hopes ther medicine would bring him back ter time and tune, but I'm afeard ther disease will hev its run, an' that he'll hev ter sing ther song ter ther last note. I'll go an' look at him."

Sam disappeared in a niche, while Nimrod attended to the fire.

Beppo's eyes gleamed like those of a tiger. He no longer had a doubt but Comstock lived. The man he had tried to kill was on the wrong side of the dark river, and likely to make trouble for him, unless a sudden bullet could compel him to cross. And this Beppo resolved to give him; he was resolved not to go away from the place leaving Comstock alive. He had caught on to enough of the conversation to realize that the old man was delirious; he must never recover his senses.

Having arrived at a conclusion he looked for means of accomplishing his end. Clearly, it would not be wise to make an offensive movement while Solo Sam was there; he must wait until the negro was the only guardian of the place.

But could he enter then? Was it not probable that the entrance would be so secured after Sam's departure that he could not pass it?

"Me get-a in now!" decided the Italian.

This conclusion arrived at, Beppo was not long in trying to execute it. He would run great risk by entering while Solo Sam remained, but his whole life had been a series of ventures, and he did not hesitate now.

No one was watching the entrance, and he began to crawl forward like a snake. Always watching for the keeper of the cave, he put aside the pine boughs and dragged his body through. No sound betrayed him, and he was ready, if the negro looked that way, to relapse into a dark and motionless heap.

Unluckily for Nimrod, he did not look, and Beppo crept through, rearranged the pines and then made his way to the darkest corner of the cave.

There he pressed against the rock and lay without any sign of life.

In a few minutes Solo Sam emerged from the niche, followed by the negro.

"That's a perceptible change fur ther better, Nimrod," said the white man, "an' I reckon we'll be able fur ter git ther old man away in a day or two. Ther fever is nipped in ther bud, an' though his mind is still wand'rin' an octave above whar it orter be, I reckon he'll come out at ther eend o' ther song in A1 time an' tune."

"I s'pect we shall make a dollar out ob de s'periment, sah," Nimrod observed.

"My beloved disciple, don't forever let yer mind wander on ther loaves an' fishes. 'Dare ter be a Daniel,' ez George Washington used fer ter observe."

"Who's George Washington, sah?"

"He's ther man ter whom ye owe yer pussional freedom. He emancipationized all ther slaves in ther kentry. But we're talkin' o' yer patient. Take good care o' him, an' see to it ye don't strike ther

wrong pitch when you're singin'. I'm g'wine back ter Durango now, but I'll call ag'in' ter-morrow night. So-long, Nimrod, an' don't let nobody in."

The two men parted at the entrance, Sam went away and Nimrod rearranged the preventative to the ingress of intruders. He little suspected he was shutting the enemy in instead of out.

Beppo lay in his corner and watched with glittering eyes. The case began to develop, and he saw that he had but one man to contend with. Still, the negro had a robust form, and it was well to proceed carefully.

Once the Italian raised his revolver and took aim, but his whole life rebelled against such a course. The sons of the southern land are noted for their devotion to the knife as a means of settling quarrels, or doing bloody work of any kind; and Beppo preferred the old, silent, swift way.

Nimrod went to the fire, sat down, and, looking into the embers, seemed to fall into deep thought.

The intruder's eyes gleamed. If the negro would remain sufficiently absorbed, he could crawl to the niche where the sick man lay, unobserved.

Possibly, after all, he was not the man Mike had shot on the mountain trail. If it proved so, he would rather retreat unseen than to commit a deed which would surely call down Solo Sam's suspicions upon him.

So he began to creep along like a cat, his gaze for the most part fixed intently on Nimrod, a drawn revolver clutched in his right hand.

If the negro turned and saw him, the sight would be his last.

Luckily for Nimrod, he did not turn.

It was really wonderful to observe the skill with which Beppo moved. No loose stone betrayed him by grating or rolling, and he so conducted his movements that there was no sound audible to Nimrod made by his creeping.

Foot by foot he drew near the niche.

Nearer yet, and then he turned the corner and was out of the negro's line of vision.

Once there he lay down, motionless, but glaring straight ahead. There lay the sick man of the cave. The light from the fire dimly lighted his couch of skins and blankets, while throwing a shadow where the would-be assassin lay, and Beppo "looked with all his eyes."

He saw an old man with white hair and beard, but he did not need to study the face to assure himself on one point.

The sick man was Comstock!

"The Italian will guide me!"

It seemed a singular chance that the words should just then fall from his lips, and though we know he had often muttered them before since he received the cowardly shot, they served to startle Beppo afresh.

A cruel smile curved his lips, and, drawing his keen knife, he crawled toward the unconscious man, murder's fever raging in his dark breast.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NIGHT OF ACTIVITY FOR VILLAINS.

COMSTOCK remained unconscious of his peril. His mind was hovering in the mystic land between the known and unknown, and had a grizzly bear stood over him he would have viewed it with indifference.

A foe as deadly, as remorseless, was beside his couch, and Beppo's eyes glittered with a startling light as he partially arose and bent over the sick man.

Then the knife—the national weapon of Italy—arose, and he nerved his arm for the fatal stroke.

"The Italian will guide me!"

Once more the words fell from Comstock's lips, and a tiger-like smile parted Beppo's lips.

"Me guide you to the spirit land-a!" he thought.

Another moment and the knife would have fallen, but, just then, two heavy hands fell upon the assassin, one on his arm and the other on his hip, and he was cast six feet away, while his weapon went rattling against the wall.

He had almost the elasticity of a rubber ball, and he came to his feet with a bound, and then ensued a tableau.

It was Nimrod who had interfered, and the negro then stood above the sick man like a Rock of Gibraltar, his form drawn to its fullest height, his nostrils expanded, and his eyes flashing with honest indignation.

"You better keep off dese premises!" he exclaimed. "No trespassers ain't wanted, an' ef you don't git away, I'll butt yer head ag'in' de wall!"

Beppo did not answer at once. He stood staring at the negro, his face a panorama of evil emotions, his breath quick-drawn and irregular. He was not dismayed, but he had seen the mettle of the negro and was not inclined to be hasty.

"How you dare lay-a a hand on me-a?" he finally hissed. "Me have your blood-a for that."

"Mebbe you will, you p'izon cut-froat, but I'll hab you unnerstan' my blood ain't kept on tap like lager beer. Dem's de sentiments ob dis chile!"

Beppo glanced toward his knife.

"You can't hab de butcher-knife; you put dat in your pipe an' smoke it out. I's gwine ter keep it as a soft-an'-near ob yer visit, sah."

"Me kill-a you!"

"When you git yer muscle up, wade right in. I's all hyar, an' ez you's brash enough ter come in un-invited, mebbe you won't object ter walkin' out on yo' ear."

The Italian dropped his hand to his belt, but, like a flash, Nimrod's hand arose and the son of the south found a revolver looking him in the face.

"I's shot rattlesnakes afore," said Nimrod, "an' I don't mind doin' it ag'in. You h'ar me, sah!"

"The Italian will guide me!"

The words came from the sick man.

"I's doin' de guidin' hyar, myself, an' de Italian has got ter pack his grip-sack an' climb ter udder climes. Mr. Maccaroni, I's gwine ter hab dis cave; you can hab all de rest ob de 'arth, fur all o' me."

The negro advanced, and Beppo braced himself for a struggle. To attempt to draw his revolver would be to invite destruction; he must depend on his personal prowess—and he was not at all fearful as to the result.

When within a few feet Nimrod dropped his revolver and leaped forward, and in a moment more the two men were clasped in a close and deadly embrace.

Beppo had expected to win with ease, but the first round sufficed to show him he had met no mean adversary. The negro was strong and quick, and but little time was needed to show that he also possessed a degree of "science," which it was hard to beat.

Back and forth they struggled like gladiators.

The first collision had taken them from the niche and they had the whole cave to themselves, but for a while it seemed as though its limits would not prove sufficient for their purpose.

The Italian saw that he had met a man who was, at the least, his equal, and he began to have great fears that he would be out-winded. He remembered the revolver in his belt, and resolved to draw and use it.

It was not for some time that he was able to lay his hand on it, but when he did it came out with a jerk. He had only to cock it, press the trigger and—

Under ordinary circumstances this was not much to do, but, even before he could draw the hammer back, another hand was on it and it was wrested away with a quickness which surprised and demoralized him.

Thud! thud! thud!

It was the sound of three distinct blows, as Nimrod thrice brought it down on the Italian's head. Many a man would have been stunned by this assault, and Beppo, hard as was his head, reeled and was assailed by a dizziness he could not overcome.

The negro saw his chance, and, without delay, he again grasped his enemy firmly and rushed him toward the cave exit. Beppo endeavored to thwart his purpose, but, for the time, he was only a child in the hands of the muscular black, and the latter sent the pine boughs spinning away with one kick, and then flung the Italian out as though he had been a log.

There was a rattling of stones for a moment, and then utter silence.

Nimrod wheeled a bowlder into place, packed up the barricade he usually erected at night, replaced the pines and then stepped back with a chuckle.

"Hi-yi! I reckon that gallyhoot won't trouble us any moah dis ebenin'. He can't git de stuns away, an' I don't b'lieve he's got any Dan O'Mighty ter blow de cave ter glory. Golly, but he's a bad one from de groun' up, an' I doan' know but I orter hab wound up his career wid a smash when I had de chance, but I ain't no ex-assinator. I'll tell Massa Sam about dis, an' I reckon he'll make de feller sing de 'Dead Song in Saul' wid a vengeance."

Nimrod then returned to the recess. Comstock, unaware of the danger he had so narrowly escaped, lay as before.

"The Italian will guide me!" he said.

"He'll guide you to everlastin' smash, ef you fool 'roun' wid him," commented the negro. "Jess you let de Italian alone—dat's my candid advice, sah. I'll go back an' see ef de feller is at it."

If Beppo was "at it" there was no visible sign, and the occupants of the cave remained unmolested through the night, though Nimrod watched with unceasing vigilance.

Durango was dark and silent. The last reveler had "gone home to his lair," and the town bade fair to sleep on peacefully until morning. No one was abroad—

Stay! we have written hastily. Through the line of cabins glides a dark form—that of a man. His movements are slow and stealthy, and he seems to take great care to escape notice. There is no one to see him, probably, but he knows there is a chance that there may be, and, of all things, he covets discovery the least.

The prowler is Zeke Wiggins.

He approaches the jail, and then pauses and looks on the building with a dark scowl.

"They're thar!" he muttered, through his teeth. "Turpentine Tom and Jim Forbes are caged like rats. Oh! curse ther day I ever follered a woman's lead! My pards is shut up, but I'm goin' ter hev 'em out. I'll do it, or Durango shall cuss ther day she set foot on Zeke Wiggins!"

He went nearer and made a circuit of the jail. It was dark, silent, and to all appearances all there were asleep.

After some meditation he went away. In five minutes he returned, bearing a ladder. This he placed against the wall, directly beneath one of the windows, and prepared to ascend.

"I'll have 'm out!"—Turpentine Tom an' Jim Forbes," he again added; "an' ef we can git ther ole woman, we'll do that, too. I hate her, fur she has ruined me in Durango, but Viola wants her, an' I've got ter humor ther gal, I s'pose. Got ter? No; I'll have her, though ther old maid stays hyar till she's a mummy. Viola is mine, anyhow!"

He went carefully up the ladder until he reached the window. There he paused to listen. All was silent, and he laid his hand on the lower sash. It yielded to the strength he laid out and slowly arose.

Had he known that two hours before it had been carefully fastened by one of the jailers, he

might have seen something suspicious in the fact that it yielded so readily then.

Unconscious of this fact, he crawled inside with all possible caution. He soon stood on the floor, and there he paused to listen.

He was safely inside the jail, and he did not doubt his ability to find and rescue his pards if no jailer interfered. He had helped to build the jail, and knew every peculiarity and corner of it.

Once more he moved forward, and his hand was soon on the door. He opened it and stood in the hall which crossed the building from east to west. All he had to do then was to find the cell which held the prisoners and take them out without creating an alarm.

His success thus far had encouraged him, but, unknown to him, an earthquake was creeping along with insidious tread.

Suddenly a light appeared on each side of him, and as he stared in startled wonder he saw two men, each holding a light, each presenting a revolver, the muzzle of which covered him relentlessly.

They laughed in concert.

"No, you don't, Zeke Wiggins!" exclaimed one. "We're hyar, an' you can't come it ter-night. Stay whar you be, fur ef ye move a ha'r, we fire!"

The young villain ground his teeth with rage.

"Fooled!" he groaned. "Sold like a tenderfoot!"

"Right you be, Zeke! Durango Dave suggested that you would very likely try this coat on, an' he planned ther trap you hev run inter. When we see'd ye put up ther ladder, we unfasted ther winder, an' you come in like a lamb. Oh! ain't you green, Zeke!"

Wiggins uttered a furious exclamation.

"Always Durango Dave!" he added, bitterly.

"Sart'in; an' why not? He's Durango's champion, an' we bet on him right along from ther letter 'A'."

"You'll bet on his corpse, ef at all, one o' these days."

"You can't make him one."

Zeke had not wholly given himself up to wrath. He knew that if he was once confined he would stand a poor chance for enjoying liberty again for some time, and he resolved to make every exertion to avoid being confined. Using his eyes well, he saw that, as he did not move at first, the jailers had settled down to the belief that he was going to submit tamely, and he determined to risk death rather than accept captivity.

The door was just behind him; he was agile and tough; he would risk all on the cast of a die.

Straining every nerve for the effort, he suddenly leaped back into the room he had first entered, moving so suddenly that they had no time to take a shot at him.

Angry exclamations and the sound of footsteps from the hall showed him they were thoroughly aroused, but he made a rush for the still-open window.

He reached it and sprung half-way through, poisoning himself for the leap, but as he did so a hand clutched his boot.

Checked in the spring he intended, he lost his balance and fell, but the man above held fast, and a moment later Zeke was dangling in mid-air, suspended by his foot!

CHAPTER XV.

MIKE GOES ON THE WAR-PATH.

DEFEAT and capture stared Zeke in the face, for he was unable to regain an upright position, but he was far from being cowed. He managed to draw his revolver, and he turned the muzzle upward at the jailer.

The latter, however, was by no means asleep, and he saw his danger, and promptly sheltered his head.

Nothing was then visible except his wrist and the hand which clutched Zeke's foot, and the darkness was so deep that they could barely be seen.

It was a risky shot, but the young rough resolved to make it.

He pulled the trigger.

A moment later he was sorry he did so. The jailer's hold did not relax, but a sharp pain in Zeke's foot told that he had sent his bullet into the wrong man.

The wound was but slight, but he writhed and roared like a wounded lion.

"Let go, you durned galoot! or I'll blow out yer brains!" he shouted, reckless of the noise he was making.

"My brains are in my head, not in my hand. Blaze away!" was the accommodating reply.

Zeke was about to comply, but at that moment something occurred which neither of them had contemplated. Zeke's foot had been gradually loosening in the boot, and, suddenly, it slipped out entirely, and the young rough went shooting down head-first.

It was not a very long distance to fall, but it was enough to break his neck if he struck on his head, and he flung out his hands in a frantic attempt to grasp something.

Luckily for him, he laid hold of the ladder, and as he held fast it had the effect of turning him over, so that he struck on his feet instead of his head.

Then he promptly darted away.

Crack! crack!

The jailer fired twice, but the bullets sped wide, and Zeke kept on his way. He knew the people would quickly arouse, and it behooved him to get out of Durango as quick as his legs could carry him.

He did not stop until he reached the shelter of the gulches, and then, free from immediate danger, he raved like a madman.

"I'll have revenge for this!" he cried; "I'll make Durango weep. Zeke Wiggins ain't ther man ter be trod under huff, an' fired at, an' knocked about,

in this style. I'll have revenge on 'em all; I will, so help me Moses!"

The sound of a shout from the village reached his ears, and he resumed his way. He went with a slight limp, for his foot gave him pain, but the wound was not serious, and he borrowed no trouble on that score.

All he thought of was to be revenged on the enemies his own viciousness had created for him.

"Phat is dhe reason dhe crayther don't come? It's not loike him ter be so tardy, an' it's meself fears harrum has come till him. By me life, I'll be after Durango hot an' heavy ef they have laid out me pard!"

Another man was contemplating revenge, and this time it was Mike O'Keefe, the ally of Beppo.

He was bending over a small fire in a hole in the rocks—it was hardly a cave—and awaiting the return of the Italian. He had waited long and the night was growing old, but Beppo did not come.

For the hundredth time he had muttered the above inquiry, but, as before, it remained unanswered. He stirred the fire and, leaning his back against the wall, was falling into a doze when a footfall aroused him.

He leaped to his feet, but there was no cause for fear; it was Beppo, at last.

The Italian's appearance was not prepossessing. Blood stained one side of his face, and his expression was so wolfish that even Mike recoiled for a moment.

Beppo, however, slouched to the fire and sat down without a word.

"Phat's dhe matter?" Mike finally managed to ask.

The Italian lifted his hat and showed a ragged wound just above his temple.

"They thought to kill-a me, but I die hard, and there are men-a who will go before me. In my own country we have the *vendetta*, and when-a men swear vengeance they keep-a it. I say Durango shall-a swim with blood for this-a!"

And still another revenger!

Beppo's lips rolled back, revealing his white teeth, and he glared like a hungry wolf at the coals.

"I'm wid yez, ter dhe death!" cried Mike. "But who have yez fought?"

"I have seen the old man-a you shot on the mountain trail-a. He did not-a die; he is alive. I try to kill-a him again to-night, but I am almost dead-a, instead."

He then told in detail of his fight with Nimrod. His head ached almost to the point of splitting. To the heavy blows received from the clubbed revolver had been added a gash, as described, when he was flung out by the negro—a fall which temporarily stunned him—and he scarcely knew how he had got back to where Mike awaited him.

He only knew that each day was giving him fresh enemies and fresh cause for hatred. So it was, for, after a long season of escape, his lawlessness did not seem to prosper.

When his grievances had been stated, he talked more calmly.

"Comstock must die," he said, twisting his fingers in his curling beard nervously. "If he lives to recover his senses, he will tell-a that which will-a ruin us. He must die! More than that, we must rescue Miss Darke and make-a much money. She is Comstock's wife, but-a she hates him and wish-a him dead. Me thinks Viola is not her niece, but her daughter, and Comstock's daughter. Good! me find-a out, and make much-a money."

"I'm with yez, ter dhe last gasp."

"I have-a work for you. First of all-a, I must get Bianca. Ah! she is a jewel; there is much-a money in her. No other voice like-a hers is outside of sunny Italy, I shall-a steal her to-morrow night-a."

"Beporra, ain't dat dangerous?"

"Are you afraid?"

"Try me!" Mike retorted.

"I will. Your work is to kill-a Durango Dave!"

The Irishman could not avoid a start.

"Are you afraid?" again asked Beppo.

"Beggara, no; I'm afraid ov no man; but I don't think I'll give him an equal chance dhe next toime."

"Right, my pard-a, right. For one so young-a, Dave is dangerous. You must-a give him no chance. Meet him when he know-a not you are 'round, and settle all with one shot-a. This is your work-a; I will steal Bianca!"

Another night.

Durango Dave sat in the saloon of the More Wet Hotel, thoughtfully smoking. Solo Sam had gone to the cave, to see Comstock, whom he hoped to bring in in a day or two, and the Mammoth Combination was giving another exhibition of their talent at the Kennel.

This was against Dave's advice, but the people had asked it so earnestly, and promised to keep out all objectionable characters, that Lewisson had felt obliged to comply.

Edna Aldene was to appear, as usual, for her wound was doing finely.

Dave was tired enough to seek his bed at once, for the whole day had been passed in a fruitless search for Zeke Wiggins, Viola and Beppo, but he was resolved not to retire until he had seen Edna safely back at the More Wet. His escort had not been requested, and he did not intend to put himself forward, but it would do no harm to be close at hand in case of trouble.

While he sat in the saloon and meditated, he was not aware that he was being secretly observed from the outside, through a window, but such was the fact.

Mike O'Keefe had come to Durango, agree-

ably to his promise, and he only awaited a chance to do his red work marked out for him by Beppo.

His eyes fairly glittered with delight when he saw Durango Dave suddenly arise and start for the door.

The young man was going to the Kennel. He knew at about what hour Edna would sing, and he could not resist the temptation to hear her.

"I'm a fool to go," he was somewhat bitterly thinking, "for every time I see her I care more and more for her, and she is too refined to ever think seriously of me, kind as she is. I'll see affairs straightened out here, and the rascals punished, and then I'll pack my grip-sack and seek fields afresh and pastures new."

He went out of the saloon, and in his preoccupation he did not notice the dark figure which skulked after him.

Just then other men were near, but Mike knew he would have a chance to get in his work before the Kennel was reached.

Dave walked with his head somewhat lowered, as though in deep thought, but his pace was such that Mike found it hard to keep up with him and, at the same time, avoid the notice of men who would gladly put him in jail if he was discovered.

Finally he lost sight of him altogether, and he was hurrying in pursuit when a man stepped from behind a cabin and grasped his arm in a crushing hold.

"Whither so fast, Mike O'Keefe?"

It was Durango Dave.

Mike saw that a trick had been played upon him—that the young champion had not been so unconscious of what was going on around him as he seemed—and he made a desperate effort to turn his revolver upon him.

Vain attempt! Dave struck the would-be assassin's arm a sharp blow, and the weapon went flying a dozen feet away.

"No, you don't, my amiable friend. I've got a word to insinuate in edgeways just here, and it's to the effect that I'm on deck. More than that, I'm not to be chewed up by any slap-sided galoot like you. I suppose you've come for revenge, but you can't have it; you may as well ask for the earth. I say, *will* you stand still?"

While Dave was talking the rough had been trying to release himself, but the youth had the advantage of hold and Mike was shown that victory is not always to the mature.

"If you'll quit your brashness for a bit, and give the court a show, the judge will observe that you needn't go back with your abnormal hankering for gore unsatisfied, though I respectfully decline to be set up like a Christmas turkey and bored full of leaks. What'll suit us both, Mr. O'Keefe, is a good, A1 double-twisted old ducl, eh?"

Durango's champion spoke genially, as though he was addressing the best friend he had in the world, but Mike's soul was filled with gall and wormwood, as well as various other explosive chemicals.

"Phat'll suit me will be ter kill yez!" he hissed.

"Well, I should chuckle. You're as full of wickedness, Michael, as a Gatling gun. Never saw one? Well, what's the gun's loss is your gain—keep away from 'em. But, about our duel. The Kennel is near at hand; we'll go over and fight our duel. Or would you prefer to do it in the jail?"

Mike knew the truth, at last; he was in a scrape and Durango Dave meant to hold his nose right on the grindstone, and as the least of two evils was preferable, he remarked that he would go to the Kennel and fight.

As they passed the door which led to the stairs the sound of singing and dancing was audible, and Dave knew one of the girls was on the stage, but he paid no attention and marched Mike into the saloon.

The place was poorly patronized that night; besides the bar-keeper there were but two persons there, and they were played-out bummers who would not squander money on the best talent in the country while a drink of whisky was retailed over the bar.

They were, however, just what Dave wanted, for he did not want the fight to be a tragic one, and he knew the bar-keeper would bear witness that all was done according to fair play.

He had not miscalculated the crowd; the bummers put the price of their services at three drinks each; and then all was speedily arranged for the match.

Mike had begun to recover a degree of his coolness, and he looked to the revolver furnished him, taking care that it was properly loaded.

He meant to kill Durango Dave if such a thing was possible.

And then the duelists took their position at opposite sides of the room, face to face, weapons in hand, and grim resolution written on each visage.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN UNLUCKY NIGHT.

"Now, then, gents," said one of the bummers, "I am habout ter give ther word. This hyar duel is 'cordin' ter Hoyle and Blackstone, an' ther cord o' honor, an' it is my duty ter say ef either o' you tries ter get in yer work ahead o' ther word 'three,' you'll git ther earth—six feet on't!"

Here he punched the other bummer in the ribs, afraid that his joke would not be fully comprehended.

"You just shut off steam on your oration-pump," observed Durango Dave. "We're here for business, and your part is to count from one to three, inclusive. At the last word we fire. Turn on the hose."

"One!" said the bummer, in a tragic voice.

The revolvers arose.

"Two!" howled the bummer, who would have made a good Othello.

The men took aim.

"Three!"

The decisive word was given, but only one revolver cracked. Mike O'Keefe had been tardy on the shoot, and his weapon went rattling to the floor, while he stood gazing at a badly injured hand.

The moment the bummer said "Three!" Durango Dave had fired, and the bullet first struck and nearly severed the Irishman's trigger-finger, and then, striking the revolver, had glanced to the right and gone straight through the palm of the hand.

Such was the melancholy spectacle at which its owner gazed.

"Round one—first blood for Durango Dave!" yelled the jolly bummer.

"It'll be second blood for me, and your nose for a faucet, if you don't dry up," said the young champion tartly. "You'll cause a complaint from the graveyard. Michael, shall we reload?"

"No, no!" groaned the wounded man; "I cave."

"Shows your good sense, my amiable friend. It's a wise mule that knows when to stop kicking. Probably your second will see to your wound."

"I'll kill him if he comes near me!"

"Go away! Why so vicious, Mr. O'Keefe?"

"I want ter die; I'm a mule-headed fool, be-gorra!"

"I could have told you that a month ago, but since it's come like a revelation, suppose you sample a little skull-and-cross-bones whisky? This gentleman of spirit will trot 'em out."

He waved his hand at the bar-keeper, but that person modestly answered:

"The title fits you, not me. I may sell spirits, but you keep them—I mean have them—Hang it! what do I mean, anyhow? I can only say that you've got 'sand' and gall enough to run an electric light."

Every one save Mike was in good spirits. He refused to drink at Dave's expense, but when they spoke of taking him to jail he only groaned.

His spirits were broken.

He was soon behind the bars.

Having disposed of him, Dave entered the Kennel hall.

All was going merrily as a marriage bell, and whoever came on the stage was applauded to the echo. Durango had taken up the sword in defense of the Mammoth Combination, and when she backed a thing it never collapsed for want of support.

But, as before, the great event of the evening was to be the singing of Edna Aldene.

Lewisson had purposely, as cunning managers do, delayed his trump card as long as he dared.

When she came upon the stage the Kennel shook with applause, and it was some time before it became clear that a score or more of brawny miners were shouting for their favorite song—"The Men of the Land of Gold."

They did not fail to applaud it as before.

After that she gave them several other songs, some of which were accompanied by dancing, which they pronounced "jest ther boss business ever see'd in Colorado."

It was long before they would let her go, and then it was only because they knew she was still suffering from her wound.

Three-quarters of an hour later the entertainment ended with great *clat*, and then Durango Dave took position near the foot of the stairs to watch for Edna when she came out. If she gave him any encouragement he would walk to the hotel with her; if not, he would at least be near enough to see that no harm came to her.

One by one the stage people emerged, but Edna was not among them.

Dave waited patiently until Lewisson came down and began locking the door. Then he stepped forward and asked for the girl.

"Oh! she went home immediately after she finished singing," the manager carelessly answered.

"Who went with her?"

"Jessie Jordan."

"No one else?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Is it possible you let them go alone?"

"I knew nothing about it. It seems Edna felt weary after leaving the stage, so she spoke to Jessie and they went out together."

Dave frowned, but he could not very well say any more. He considered it very reckless for the girls to venture out without a male protector, when they knew Edna had enemies abroad, but it was too late to help it then. If she was in her room, all well and good, but he would warn her not to run the risk again.

The two men walked together to the More Wet, but when they arrived there they were informed that neither Edna nor Jessie had returned.

The information fell like a bombshell. Vague uneasiness changed to well-defined fear, and Dave and Lewisson were on the alert at once.

If Edna was not at the hotel, where was she? Clearly, she would not go anywhere else of her own free will, and the manager's lips framed the word which was in Dave's mind.

"Beppo!"

"Ay!" cried the youth, "it is to him we must look for her. Come at once! We will retrace our steps to the Kennel; some one may have seen, or heard, something of the girls along the way."

They went out and had traveled half the distance when a sound like a moan from behind the cabin reached their ears. They darted around and saw—Jessie Jordan!

She lay prostrate on the ground, and they thought, at first, she was dead or dying, but further examination proved her to be bound and gagged.

Both men worked together and she was soon released.

"Where is Edna?" Durango Dave cried.

"Great heavens! I don't know."

"Don't know? What do you mean?"

"Is she gone?"

"Gone! Of course she is gone. What do you know? Speak quickly!"

"Do not blame me; it was not my fault," said Jessie, with a burst of tears. "She asked me to accompany her to the hotel and I consented; I, for one, did not think of danger. We were half-way when I saw a man spring out from behind a cabin. I was startled, but I had no time to flee. Some heavy weight seemed to fall on my head and I lost consciousness. When I recovered, I was behind the cabin, bound and gagged. That is all I know; but where, oh! where is Edna?"

"Abducted!"

Durango Dave made the reply in a ringing voice.

"By whom?" she gasped.

"Who, unless by that accursed Italian? Lewisson, there is work for us to do. The black-faced scoundrel has accomplished his purpose, but I have wrested Edna from him before and I will do it again. I will hunt him down like the wolf he is—I swear it!"

Day had dawned.

At the very first sign a party of men left Durango. They included Dave, Lewisson and two other men, all members of the variety troupe. A second party, composed of miners, would be ready to follow in a short time.

Durango Dave had brought to the aid of his party an auxiliary which he hoped a good deal from. It was a dog of a mongrel breed, rather mature age and no known skill as a trailer, but it was believed he only awaited a chance to distinguish himself, and in this case the office had sought the dog, not the dog the office.

He was led to the place where Jessie Jordan had been found, and, after the usual artifices had been employed, he "lifted" the trail and exhibited a desire to start briskly for the mountain.

One of the Parzoretti brothers, gymnasts, who was familiarly known as "Trapeze Tim," held one end of a cord which was attached to the dog's neck, and away they went.

The brute trailer started at a run, and they let him have his way for a while, but in a comparatively short time it was found that it was hard work to race over the mountain at such speed.

"Leopard" was made to moderate his pace, and the work was continued systematically.

The trail led away nearly north, and it became clear that the abductor was making for some retreat in the gulches. If they had doubted that they were on the right track, proof was obtained when they struck softer ground. There were footprints which all the theater people declared were Edna's, and Dave, remembering that Beppo had feet almost as delicate as a woman's, did not doubt the second person was he.

For two miles there was no difficulty. Then they arrived at a stream and the dog was at fault. They did not need to wonder at the cause; common-sense told them the wily Italian had taken to the water to break the trail.

They followed along the stream, watching for tracks and hoping Leopard would regain the scent, but in both respects they were foiled. The stream finally ended at a fall, but there was no sign of Beppo.

"What's to be done?" Trapeze Tim gloomily asked.

"We must begin a systematic search," said Lewisson.

"What good would it be? The hills are full of places where he could hide."

"In my opinion, we must rely upon the dog," said Dave, "and he is not acting to suit me."

He tried to caress the animal's head, but he shrunk away with a growl.

"Going mad!" exclaimed Flying Frank.

"Nonsense!" said the manager.

Dave did not answer, but he was willing to admit the actions of Leopard were peculiar. He certainly seemed losing his value as a trailer.

They would not delay, so they retraced their way by the stream. Half the distance had been passed when the dog seemed to strike a trail, and showed a strong desire to shoot off toward one side, and they let him go, Trapeze Tim running to keep up with him.

He led them to a hole in the rocks, where he began to bark furiously, and it was the general opinion that Beppo was hived. The next question was, How was he to be got out?

Durango Dave's blood was up, and he resolved to make no more delay. He suggested a dash, and the trio expressed their willingness to stand by him. Accordingly, they arranged in line, with the champion at their head, and the risk was made.

Thinking of it afterward they wondered at their utter recklessness, but they were not in a mood then to count the cost. If Edna was there, they were going to have her.

For a moment they thought they had succeeded, for, though there was no shooting which would have been Beppo's way of greeting them, they found a female form in the den. She fought them, however, like a wildcat, and it was not until they had recoiled to the entrance, taking her with them, that they knew the truth.

They had found Viola Vincent.

The girl presented an appearance very different from that of her first interview with Durango Dave. Her hair was disheveled, her dress torn and muddy, and she glared at them almost like a mad person.

"Keep away, or I will kill you!" she cried.

Dave realized her mental excitement and strove to quiet her.

"Be calm!" he said, "we are not your enemies."

"I know you; you are Zeke Wiggins!"

"On the contrary, I am not, nor do I know anything about him, at present. You, however, are one of the persons wanted at Durango, and we will take you in."

"You are going to take me to Wiggins!" she vehemently exclaimed.

"Wrong again. We are not friends of that wretch; on the contrary, we should be pleased to furnish him with a rope as a reward for his ill-deeds."

It was not until several moments later that Viola became sufficiently calm to be reasoned with, and, even then, no information could be had from her. It was clear she had had a severe time, and from the persistency and horror with which she mentioned Wiggins, he seemed at the bottom of it all.

She finally became sufficiently calm so that it was decided Lewisson and Flying Frank should take her to Durango, while Dave and Trapeze Tim resumed the search for Beppo and his captive.

The former party went away, and then Dave spoke to Leopard, who had been lying in a heap during the pause. The animal looked up with a vicious growl.

"He's going mad, sure enough," said the gymnast.

"I don't know but you're right, but we'll have more work out of him if possible."

So saying, the young champion pulled the animal to his feet, but he had no sooner done it than Leopard shot away like an arrow, the rope trailing behind him.

CHAPTER XVII.

LAST SCENES OF ALL.

DURANGO DAVE and the gymnast promptly followed, for, though the dog seemed to have gone entirely wild, he might be soothed by proper attention, and, situated as they were, his aid would be invaluable if it could be secured.

They pursued him over a ridge and then saw him speeding toward a canyon.

"I know this region," said Dave, abruptly. "The canyon curves, just below; you follow directly behind him, and I'll go this way and cut him off."

Trapeze Tim agreed, and away each of them went in his allotted course. Dave ran a break-neck course over the rocks until he reached a slope which was almost a precipice; down this he went with more speed than regard for safety.

As he neared the foot he suddenly paused, held motionless by a strange scene below him. There was a sharp cry and two persons came running toward him. The foremost was a girl and he recognized Edna; the second was a man—Beppo!

Those for whom he had hunted were found, and under circumstances as favorable as he had dared hope. He grew strong in the desire and resolution to aid the girl.

So far, neither of them had seen him; one was fleeing, the other pursuing, so blindly that all other objects became dwarfed or invisible. Proof of this was obtained when the girl suddenly paused and threw up her arms with a gesture of despair.

"Trapped!" she cried. "I am in a *cul-de-sac*."

It was indeed a trap, for on three sides rose rocky slopes which she certainly could not ascend in time to escape the pursuit. Beppo uttered a cry of triumph as he saw her dilemma.

"Life of me, I have-a you!" he cried. "You are mine—mine forever. You cannot run-a further; come to Beppo!"

Edna caught a stone from the ground.

"Stand back!" she cried. "My weapon is a rude one, but I will do my best to make it effective."

"Ha! ha! I laugh-a at you, little Bianca. What can-a you do? I say-a you are mine—mine forever. Aha! I have you now!"

He stretched out his arms, but there was a light spring from the rocks above and the Italian's throat was seized by Dave's strong fingers.

"Wait till you hear from the back counties," he cried. "I'm here and blowing my bugle for the other candidate."

For a moment Beppo was dumfounded, but he speedily recovered and sprang at his youthful adversary like a tiger, striking and scratching.

"Life of me! I will have your blood!" he shrieked. "You kill-a Mike—you, ou, ladrone. I kill-a you; I tear-a you in pieces. Die, evil demon, die!"

There could be no doubt but he meant to do all he threatened, and his attack was most furious, but, though Dave had never been so hard-beset in the later years of his life, he managed to hold his own and keep from his face those hands which were trying to rend as well as strike.

They finally grappled and fell together.

Dave was at the top, but Beppo glided snake-like from beneath him. They partially arose and renewed the struggle, when Edna, who had fallen on her knees to pray for her champion, uttered a new cry.

"The dog! the dog!"

Even then her words reached the youth's ears and caused him vague alarm, and he turned his head. There was ample need of fear.

Leopard was bounding forward, the rope still trailing from his neck, but it was clear he did not come as a friend. There were specks of froth on his mouth and breast, his eyes gleamed wildly, his parted lips exposed his teeth—at the first glance Dave knew the dog was at last mad.

Beppo saw as much, but the advantage was with him in that Dave was nearer the animal. The younger man must be the one to meet the infuriated brute.

No time was given the champion to think, and, as the dog leaped forward to fasten his jaws on his thigh, he released his hold on Beppo with one hand and grasped the animal's throat.

Doubly assailed, Durango Dave was in the greatest peril of his life, and Edna uttered a cry as she saw the Italian raise his knife to deal a fatal blow.

But Dave was not conquered. He, too, saw the knife, and with all his force he swung Beppo around and as the man and dog collided, both fell to the ground together.

Leopard did not seem to care whom he attacked, and in a moment more he had fastened his jaws on Beppo's throat.

The doomed wretch uttered a wild cry, but Dave did not intend to stand by and see even him meet with such a fate. He drew his revolver with a jerk and, placing it close to the dog's head, pulled the trigger.

There was a report, a snarl checked in its origin, and Leopard fell over, kicked once or twice and was dead.

But Beppo was little better. The blood was rolling from the wound in his throat, and he put both hands to it and writhed like a crushed serpent.

"Life of me!" he cried; "I am kill-a—I die! Bind-a the wound—ah! too late!"

Beppo, the Italian, straightened his limbs and was dead.

For a while neither Dave nor Edna spoke, but there was a sound of footsteps and Solo Sam and Nimrod came running toward them, closely followed by Trapeze Tim.

"Anthems an' barcarolers!" cried the former, "what sort o' a sanguinous episode is this yer?"

There was no answer, and he added:

"Hyar lies Bepper, dead ez a church-yard, an' I allow thar hez been warm work. Did ye do it, pard?"

"It was the work of the dog," said Trapeze Tim; "I knew he was going mad!"

Durango Dave merely turned to Edna.

"This is no place for you," he said, gently. "Come away and forget this scene."

It was one she could never forget. He raised her, noting how she trembled, and led her away. Their friends followed, and Dave explained what had happened.

Then Edna told of her captivity. It was, of course, Beppo who captured her at the village, but her experience had not been particularly severe. It was the Italian's wish to bind her to him as of yore, and himself profit by her wonderful voice, and to do that he knew he must use her gently. They were on their way north when she seized the chance to break away and make a dash for liberty—with what result, the reader has already seen.

"He won't never trouble you no more," said Solo Sam, gravely. "He's sung his life-song ter ther last note, and though it ended in a tragic way, I can't say ther world is ther worse off for it."

"Let us return to Durango," said Dave, abruptly.

"Wait a bit, an' perhaps we kin sing a double song," said Sam. "My patient o' ther cave is in his right mind, at last, an' all ready ter go ter Durango when we can git him thar. Come an' see him!"

He led the way to the cave, from which he and Nimrod had been summoned by the sound of fighting.

They found Comstock sitting up and looking better than could have been expected. His mind had cleared, and all was remembered up to the time when he was shot on the mountain trail.

He was now ready to go on to Durango, and he would have more faithful guides than Beppo had proved.

The old man looked at Edna long and earnestly, and whenever his gaze rested on her face he became so absent-minded that they had to speak twice to call his attention.

Back at Durango.

We need not dwell upon the journey, for it was one of great care, because of Comstock's weakness, rather than of incident. Once there he was given a comfortable room at the More Wet Hotel, and to Solo Sam and Dave he told why he had been anxious to reach the town.

He had received a note stating that his wife and child, from whom he had been long separated, were there, but he had barely reached Durango with his life.

No one knew of such a woman as he described as his wife, but in the course of his conversation Dave thought of Miss Darke and suspected it was she. Comstock was taken to the jail, and at first sight of the woman he reeled back.

"Hester!" he exclaimed.

Miss Darke recoiled.

"You here—alive! They told me you were dead!"

"Perhaps it is not due to you that I am alive. They tried to kill me, but I still live. Hester, where is my wife?"

Miss Darke laughed mockingly.

"She, at least, is dead. I saw her die."

"And my child?"

"How do I know? I had a girl I intended to pass off as yours—Viola Vincent—but she has proved ungrateful and I will have no more to do with her. It was I wrote you to come to Durango. I would have made you believe her your daughter, but she has today confessed all. I disown her. She is a nameless song-and-dance girl; punish her as an impostor if you will. Go away from me, all; I will speak no more!"

She turned her face to the wall and resolutely kept her vow.

As they went out, Dave remembered Viola and wondered what she had confessed. He remember-

ed, too, that Edna had not yet seen the girl, and might recognize her, and they went to her cell.

Viola had recovered from her nervous excitement, but she was weak, crushed and humbled.

Edna recognized her. A year before she had been the innocent cause of preventing Viola, who, as a song-and-dance girl, was known under another name, from getting a good engagement. The management had taken the better singer of the two, and Viola had no position at all.

It was for this she had hated Edna, and when Miss Darke made overtures to her, they joined hands against the "modern Jenny Lind."

Miss Darke had agreed to make Viola an heiress, by palming her off as Comstock's daughter, but, first, Edna must be crushed. Why Miss Darke hated her Viola did not know, but when the old man had heard all he smote his hands together.

"There is light at last!" he cried. "The woman you call Miss Darke was my wife's sister. She, too, cared for me, and when I married Mildred she swore to part us. She did it—the story is too long for me to tell now—and for years I have been a wanderer on the face of the earth. My wife is dead—I believe Hester so far—but my daughter lives—she is this same Edna Aldene. That is why Miss Darke hated her so. I saw the resemblance to my lost wife when I first saw her, at the cave."

Comstock's suspicion was soon proven true. Finding that they were so sure, Miss Darke confessed, in order to show how much Edna had suffered. She had fallen into the hands of Beppo when she was a little child, and the reader has had a glimpse of the life she led.

But, at last, she was united to her surviving parent, and the future seemed to hold no trouble for them.

With a glance at that future we will end our story.

Mike O'Keefe recovered from his wound and, with Turpentine Tom and Jim Forbes, was duly punished. Beppo was forever past human justice.

The night before Viola was found, so frightened, in the cave, she had become afraid of Zeke Wiggins and fled. He pursued, and though she escaped, the night of terror was never forgotten. They allowed her to go unpunished, and she at once disappeared from their view. There is no danger that she will reappear.

Zeke Wiggins was next heard of at Leadville. Why he deserted Durango unceremoniously is not clear, but he found a grave at the former city a few weeks later.

No one knew just what ought to be done with Miss Darke, but she settled the question by committing suicide in her cell.

Solo Sam and Nimrod bade a genial adieu to our friends and went in quest of new adventures.

Comstock took his daughter to Iowa, where he owned a fine estate, but they did not go alone. Durango Dave, otherwise David Marriner, was one of the party. He went with the understanding that he was to be the old man's superintendent, but Comstock had taken a fancy to him and suspected how matters would end.

People at Durango knew better how Dave had lived when they knew he was employed by a private detective firm in New York, but the successful end of one of their hardest cases, with which this story has nothing to do, caused the young man to abandon the business.

He, too, had an idea in his mind when he accompanied Comstock; and everything came to a happy end the other day when pretty Edna, whose real name was Mildred, became Mrs. David Marriner.

Lewisson's "Mammoth Combination" is still on the road, and Jessie Jordan and the Parzoretti brothers are with it, but the troupe has never since achieved the great success which attended it when Edna Aldene thrilled the miners with her song—"The Men of the Land of Gold!"

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